the Ranee of Jhansi
D. V. TAHMANKAR

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1958

With love and affection
to Jeane

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A word of thanks

A hundred years ago, in 1858, Lakshmibai, Ranee of Jhansi, fell in the battle of Gwalior and, for all practical purposes, the Indian Revolt came to an end. Whatever resistance the rebel leaders, such as Rao Saheb, Tatya Tope and the Begum of Oudh, could put up against the British became more and more symbolic than real after the Ranee's death. Her disappearance from the scene, therefore, is rightly regarded as a significant landmark in Indian history and the beginning of a new phase in Indo-British relations. It was in 1858 that by a Royal Proclamation Queen Victoria formally took over the Indian administration from the East India Company.

The Ranee of Jhansi has been acclaimed by Indians and British alike as the bravest soldier on the rebel side. But her career has borne a blemish all these years as a result of one-sided accounts of the massacre at Jhansi of English men, women and children. Even the most responsible and informed historians of the day, such as Sir John Kaye and Colonel G. B. Malleson, have condemned her for the crime. She is *a prima vista* guilty in their view.

In this book I have attempted to show by citing evidence, which was either overlooked by the British historians or was not available to them, that the Ranee was innocent of the grave crime she has been charged with. I shall feel amply rewarded if my efforts go some way to vindicate her name and character, and thus secure for her the historical justice to which she is entitled.

Many friends have helped me in writing this story but I can mention only a few of them, without whose assistance I should not have been able to finish the book so soon. They are Professor

S. R. Parasnis of Fergusson College, Poona; Shri V. P. Pandit, Keeper of Historical Records, Gwalior; Shri R. H. Divecha of Thana and Shri L. Pandit of Indore, who supplied me with valuable books and material. I am also deeply thankful to Mr Mervyn Jones who read through the manuscript and helped me in preparing the press copy. I must also express my grateful thanks to my old friend, Shri G. G. Dandekar of Bhivandi, for his unfailing support and encouragement in my effort to 'sell' Indian personalities to the Western reader.

A book of this kind could not be written without having an easy access to old records and references. In this connection I acknowledge with thanks the most ungrudging help and co-operation I received from Mr S. C. Sutton, Librarian of the Commonwealth Office Library (formerly the India Office Library) and his staff.

D. V. TAHMANKAR

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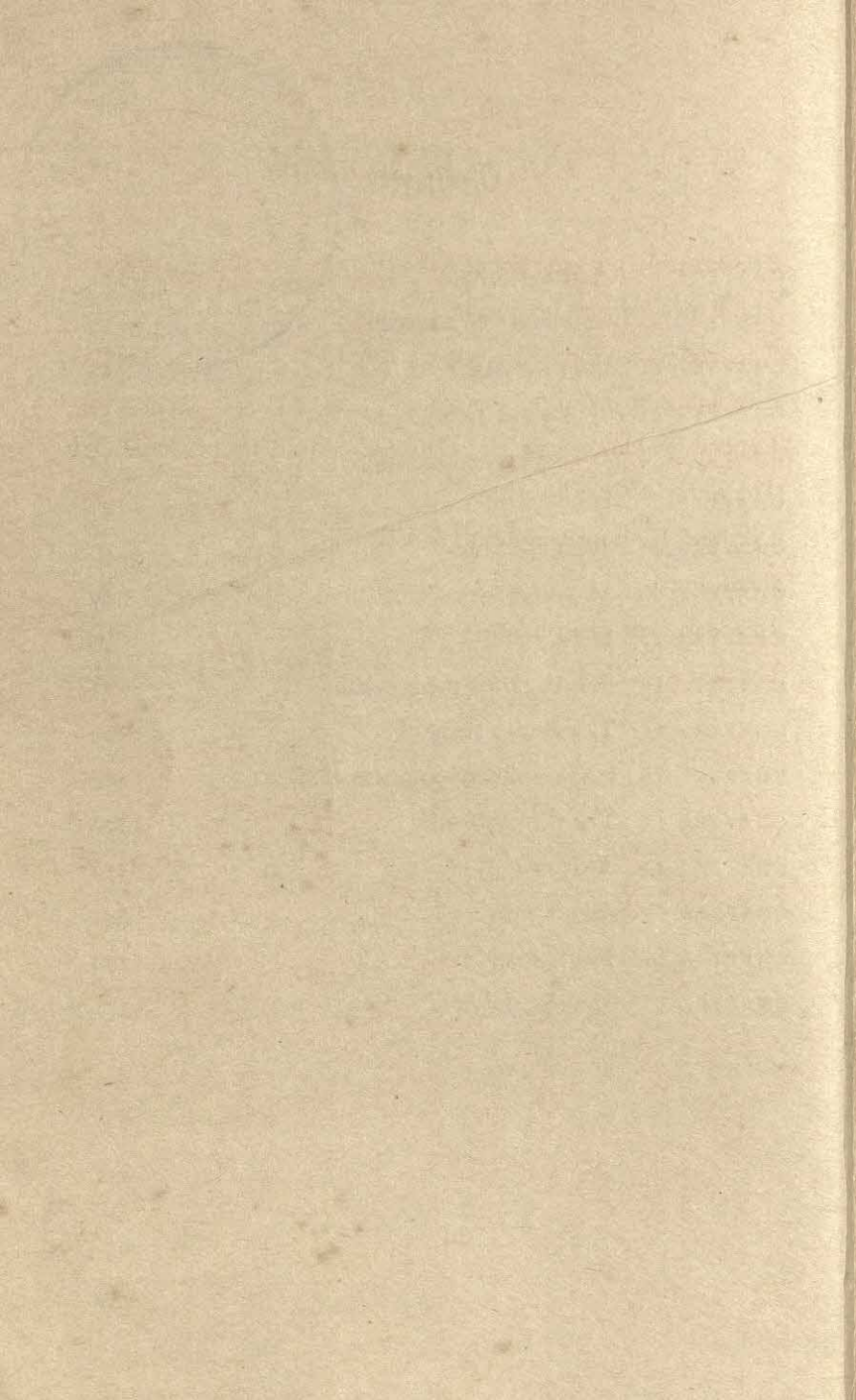
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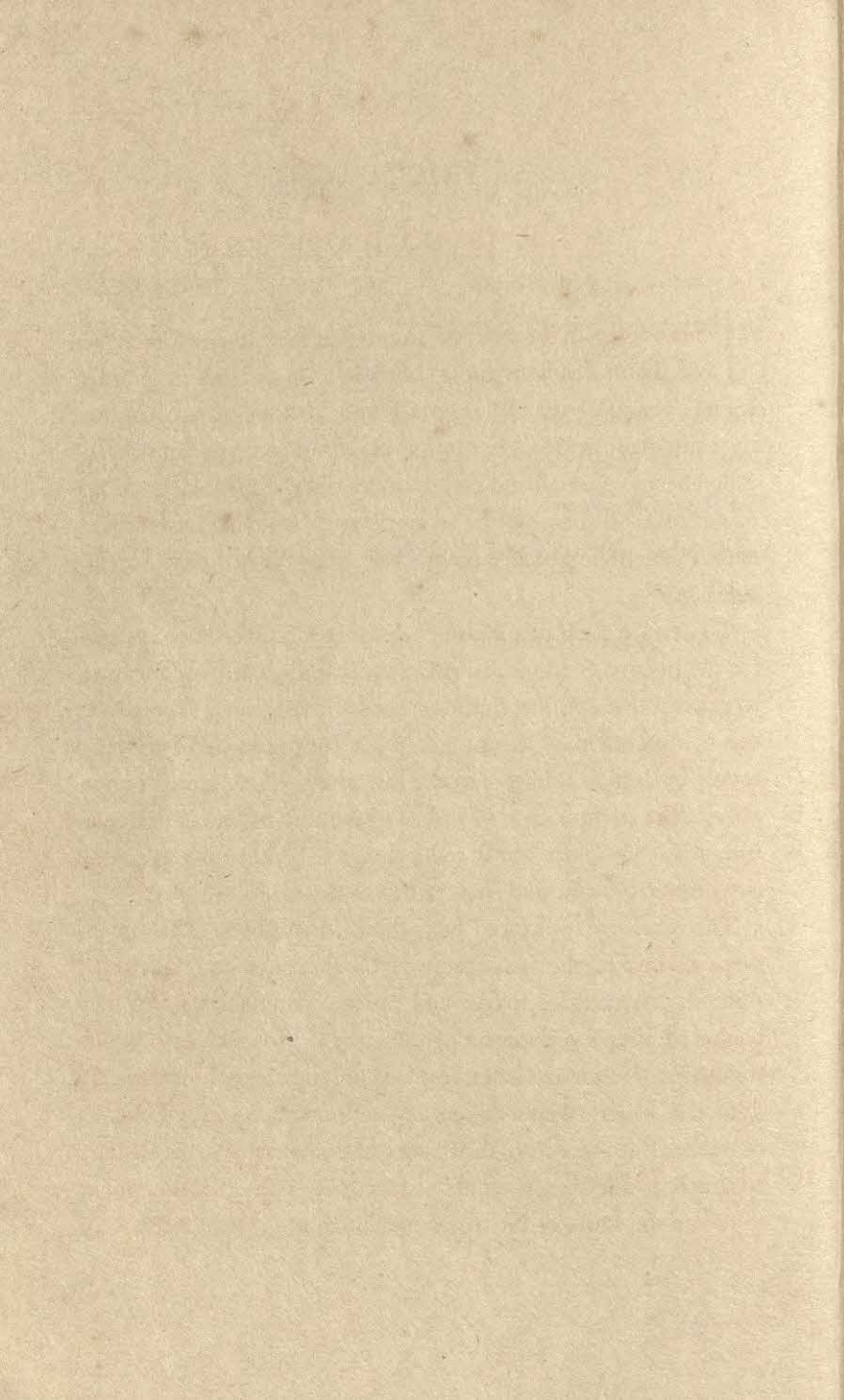
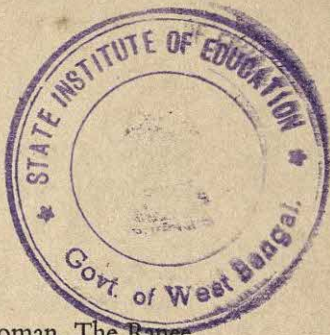

CHAPTER I

A proud people

This book tells the story of a remarkable woman. The Ranee of Jhansi holds in India, both in history and in popular legend, the place that belongs in France to Joan of Arc; and for the same reasons. First, her uprightness and courage can truly be called heroic. Second and no less important, her name is a symbol of nationhood, because the struggle with which it is identified, and in which she played a unique part, was waged against foreign rule.

To narrate the Ranee's career—as brief as Joan's—is to epitomize the history of the Indian Mutiny. It is also, in large measure, to explain that episode. In the accepted British view, expressed in the name chosen by historians, what happened in 1857 was a revolt by Indian soldiers against discipline, which ended inevitably in the reimposition of order. In the lore of Indian nationalism, it was a popular war of independence. Neither interpretation is wholly true, and both have truth in them.

The rebels of 1857 faced both forward and back. Their deeds were to inspire the mass pressure by the poor and unlettered millions that created a free and unitary nation-state; yet they hankered after a restoration of the ancient hierarchies on which the British conquerors had trampled, and they served the princely dynasties which twentieth-century nationalism regarded only as obstacles. Both aspects of the rising can be discerned in the Ranee's character and actions. It would be fanciful to think that she fought to create the India of Nehru; but there is more than a touch of

his kind of leadership in her reliance on the common people of Jhansi and in their unforced loyalty to her.

It is well, therefore, to look first at these people and their homeland. The town of Jhansi is almost in the geographical centre of India, about 250 miles south of Delhi, and nowadays on the main road and railway route between the capital and Bombay. Round it is the kingdom, of moderate size when compared to other Indian states, over which the Ranee ruled; but this is itself a part of the region known as Bundelkhand, a natural unit by reason both of its character and its history.

It is broken, hilly country, rising to heights of 3,000 feet: fertile enough in places, but largely covered—especially a century ago—with forests, and here and there with impenetrable jungle. It is the last outpost of the vast tableland of the Deccan, which stretches southward all the way to Cape Comorin. North and east of Bundelkhand lie the rich, open plains of the Ganges and its tributaries; to the west is the arid semi-desert of Rajputana.

Bundelkhand's history is warlike, and by long tradition its people are brave, dogged, and independent in spirit. Time and again it has served as a rampart to protect the old Hindu civilization of the Deccan and take the shock of invasions from the north. As long ago as the ninth century it was united and prosperous under Rajput kings, and one of them, in the eleventh century, raised an army of 80,000 men and threw back Afghan invaders who had overrun the plains. Three hundred years later, Bundelkhand met defeat and was annexed to the Mogul empire, but not many years passed before persistent unrest won the restoration of independence. A ruler of a slightly later period was Durga Vati, queen of parts of Bundelkhand close to what later became the state of Jhansi, and a worthy forerunner of the Ranee who is the

subject of this book. At the head of her armies, she repelled three Moslem attacks, during the last of which, as a chronicler wrote, 'she fell nobly fighting, on a heap of her slain countrymen'. Her ashes were buried in a narrow defile between two precipitous hills, and travellers still lay flowers or rock-crystals on the monument raised there by her people.

The fort or citadel of Jhansi was built on a steep-sided rock by a Raja of Orcha in 1615, and the town grew up in its shadow. The Raja's old capital, Orcha, is about six miles away, and tradition says that a visiting prince, when asked if he could see the new fort from the roof of the palace of Orcha, replied: '*Jhain-si*'—'like a shadow', thus giving it a name.

In the seventeenth century the kings of Orcha, now the chief among the states into which Bundelkhand had become divided, fought against the Mogul Empire with varying fortune, and managed to retain some degree of independence while paying tribute to Delhi. This was not enough for Emperor Aurangzeb, who came to the throne in 1658 and set out to impose complete subjection and the Moslem faith on the Hindu states of the Deccan. Bundelkhand put up a fierce resistance under an able leader, Chhatra Sal, who inflicted a heavy defeat on the imperial army sent against him and captured its generals. Thanks to his own successes and to the Empire being involved in a hard-fought war with the great Mahratta kingdom farther south, Chhatra Sal won independence for his dominions, which he had considerably enlarged. When Aurangzeb died in 1707, this independence was recognized by his successor, and there was peace until 1732.

In that year, a fresh onslaught came from the Moslem viceroy of Allahabad. Chhatra Sal, by now old and infirm, asked for

help from the Mahrattas, and the imperial troops were again defeated.

The head of the Mahratta state was the Peshwa, a title originally given to the first minister. The Peshwas had eclipsed the titular kings, much as the Shoguns in Japan eclipsed the emperors, and the office, which carried effective power, had become hereditary. Chhatra Sal, out of gratitude, ceded a third of his realm to the Peshwa, Baji Rao I, who had come to his rescue. Jhansi was included in this territory.

In the year 1759, a rebellion broke out which was put down by a Mahratta general, Raghunath Rao, who was made ruler of Jhansi and the surrounding district under the suzerainty of the Peshwa. This position was made hereditary, and the Subedars of Jhansi, as semi-independent monarchs, became equal members of the Mahratta Confederacy, along with their counterparts at Gwalior, Indore, and Baroda. Raghunath Rao himself ruled with great ability until 1795; he was an efficient administrator who built many temples and wells and established a uniform revenue system. Then he retired to the holy city of Benares to follow the life of a *sanyasin*—one who renounces worldly goods and pleasures. When his end was near he drowned himself in the sacred waters of the Ganges, the supreme act of piety and purity for a Hindu.

He was succeeded by his brother, Shivaram Bhau. The Peshwa's power was now declining, and the British, from their base at Bombay, were encroaching on his dominions. Shivaram was the first ruler in the confederacy to discern this trend and to stop sending revenue payments to the Mahratta capital, Poona. In 1802 the Peshwa ceded to the East India Company certain territories which had been subject to Jhansi. Shivaram, convinced

that the Peshwa was a broken reed, lost no time in getting on the right side of the new force in Indian history.

He informed Lord Lake in 1803 that, if the Company wished to possess his kingdom and fort, he was ready to submit on the production of an order from the Peshwa. In this event, he asked 'as a favour' for a grant 'for the support of his cavalry and infantry and the maintenance of his family'. This abject offer of unconditional surrender is all the more extraordinary because the British had made no threatening move against Jhansi. It is said that Shivaram was tricked by an agent of Lord Lake's, one Izzalkhan; but his previous record was that of a shrewd and, indeed, a brave ruler, who had helped and protected the other chiefs of Bundelkhand and thus earned their respect.

The probable truth is that Shivaram, though he may be judged as an opportunist and a man without principles, was making an astute calculation. He could no longer rely on the Peshwa, who was indeed on the verge of losing his throne as one part of his territory after another fell to British conquest. Nor could Jhansi's forces possibly resist a British attack. He reckoned that the Company, once assured that he was not an enemy, would decline his offer of surrender and confirm him as a ruler. In this he was right, and his prudence paid a handsome dividend.

In January 1804 he went personally to the British headquarters and put his army at their disposal. It was employed, as the Governor-General, Lord Wellesley, wrote a little later, 'in co-operating in the defence of Bundelkhand and the adjoining districts'. Shivaram's example, Wellesley added, 'has induced several other chiefs in that quarter to place themselves under the protection of the British Government'. A treaty was also signed, whereby Shivaram professed his entire submission and sincere

attachment to the British Government and promised to consider its friends as his friends and its enemies as his enemies.

This treaty preserved a formal link between Jhansi and the Peshwa, but in 1818 the Mahratta Confederacy ceased to exist, when the Peshwa, in a new treaty with the British, renounced all connection with his former tributary states. The ruler of Jhansi was now recognized as 'independent sovereign of a hereditary principality'. Then Shivaram, like his brother, retired to live as a saint. Renouncing all conversation, he repeated the holy name of Rama, and made his bed in the sands beside the Ganges, in whose waters he finally drowned himself.

The throne passed to his grandson, Ramachandra Rao, and under an agreement reaffirming the treaty of 1804 he and his heirs were recognized by the British as 'hereditary rulers' of Jhansi. Ramachandra's one aim was to excel his grandfather in showing his loyalty to the British Raj. In 1825, when a rebellion in a nearby part of Central India surprised the British with insufficient forces on the spot, Ramachandra sent his troops to save the situation. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General, paid a special visit to Jhansi and conferred on its ruler the title of Maharaja, referring to him with approval as 'the devoted servant of the glorious King of England'. The simple-minded Ramachandra, overwhelmed by this favour, begged to be allowed to adopt the Union Jack as the flag of Jhansi. The request was granted, and the flag was hoisted over the highest tower of Jhansi Fort.

During the first Burma War, Ramachandra helped the British by advancing 70,000 rupees and declined to accept repayment. He was commended as 'a man of the most amiable disposition'. His people, however, took a different view, and there was a

rebellion on the part of some chiefs whose self-respect was outraged by his servility. Ramachandra died in 1835, leaving the state deep in debt through his generosity toward the British. His uncle, the next Maharaja, was an even worse ruler, for he was a dissolute character and also a leper, but luckily he died three years later, to be succeeded by his brother, Gangadhar Rao. Gangadhar's title was disputed by three other claimants and the matter was settled by a British Commission, which reported that it was bound to acknowledge as ruler the person nearest in relationship to the deceased.

Gangadhar showed himself to be a prince of considerable resolution and dignity, qualities which were certainly needed at this difficult time in Jhansi's history. Because of his predecessor's unfitness to govern, the state was managed by a Court of Ward under British supervision. Independence, already restricted, could not be guaranteed to last. The people of Jhansi had heard terrible stories of the British greed for gold, which had brought wealthy Bengal to ruin. Under the Company's rule, skilled craftsmen had become paupers, while peasants and landlords alike were cruelly taxed—and British India was swallowing more and more quasi-independent states.

At the beginning of his reign, Gangadhar was faced by defiance from turbulent petty chieftains. Thugs who were at large in Jhansi presented another menace. He made an agreement with the British, who, in return for the cession of two districts which yielded a revenue of 227,000 rupees, supplied him with two battalions of trained soldiers and allowed him to raise his own force. The Maharaja thus commanded 5,000 soldiers, 2,000 police, 500 cavalry, 22 elephants and 4 guns. The rebel chiefs were brought to book, thuggee was suppressed, and peace and

prosperity returned to Jhansi. By his tact and firmness, Gangadhar Rao earned the respect of the neighbouring rulers, who called him 'uncle' and sought his advice whenever they were in political or financial difficulties.

Toward the British, the Maharaja conducted himself with scrupulous correctness and expected the same in return. He would not tolerate even the suspicion of a slight to his position on the part of British officials, and never hesitated to put them in their place if they deviated from accepted etiquette. One year the Daserah festival fell on a Sunday, and the officer commanding the British contingent, which normally took part in the ceremonial procession with the rest of the state army, sent word that he and his men would not be present because they did not carry arms on their Sabbath. The Maharaja promptly reminded the officer that the troops had been put under his command in exchange for ceded territory, which would be reoccupied if the contingent were not on parade. He won his point.

The British came to hold Gangadhar Rao in high regard and treat him with deference. When he went on a pilgrimage to Benares, the Governor-General instructed British officials *en route* to see that he was suitably received wherever he stopped for rest or refreshment. At Benares, the responsible official did not turn up to receive the Maharaja, who wrote to Calcutta to complain; the man had to apologize and later to resign. Then, at a reception in honour of the royal visit, a Government servant —a Bengali named Rajendra Babu—was the only one of the guests who failed to stand up when Gangadhar arrived. The Maharaja ordered two of his men to thrust their arms under Rajendra Babu's and keep him on his feet for a considerable time. The Bengali lodged a complaint, but the

Governor-General told him that he had only himself to blame.

The Maharaja, who had found the state treasury empty when he came to the throne, wisely allowed financial affairs to be supervised by British officials. The revenues rose as order and peaceful trade recovered. Gangadhar's administration was praised for its efficiency by both Indian and British observers. Hunter's *Imperial Gazetteer* noted: 'His assessments were impartially collected, remissions were granted in years of scarcity, and the Raja himself was personally popular'. His chief attention was devoted to works of public improvement. Sir William Sleeman, who was stationed at the court of Jhansi, recorded that the city had 60,000 inhabitants at this time and was celebrated for its manufacture of carpets. Of this period Sleeman wrote in his memoirs:

'The Rajas of Jhansi were served by the most respectable, able, and honourable men in the country, while the other chiefs of Bundelkhand could get no man of this class to do their work for them. This was the only court in Bundelkhand in which such men could be seen, simply because it was the only one in which they could feel themselves secure—while other chiefs confiscated the property of ministers who had served them with fidelity, on the pretence of embezzlement. . . . I have always considered Jhansi among the native states of Bundelkhand as a kind of oasis in the desert—the only one in which man can accumulate property with the confidence of being permitted by its rulers freely to display and enjoy it'.

The people of Jhansi, who loved and admired their ruler, had only one cause for anxiety. They longed for a direct heir to the throne; indeed, on this depended the future safety and freedom of the state. Since the foundation of the reigning dynasty, the

throne had almost always passed to a brother or an uncle of the monarch who left it. The dispute at the time of Gangadhar's accession had given the British a chance to intervene in Jhansi's affairs and set themselves up as arbiters. If such a situation arose again, the people foresaw, the consequences might well be even more serious.

Ramabai, the Maharaja's first wife, died childless, and for a long time he did not marry again. This can almost certainly be explained by the fact that he had been deeply attached to Ramabai, and that later he could not find a bride to his liking. However, rumours began to circulate that he was either impotent or homosexual. There was an eccentric side to his temperament; he was a patron of the arts and keenly interested in the theatre. He directed plays and sometimes appeared in them. On occasions he played female parts, as was the custom in India, where there were no actresses until the twentieth century. But the enjoyment he took in these performances and his liking for women's dress became common knowledge in Jhansi. The Indian historian Parasnis records that the British political agent once asked the Maharaja why he wore bangles, the symbol of feminine shyness and docility. Gangadhar replied that the British were the masters in India and all her rajas and maharajas were wearing bangles.

It was in 1842, when the Maharaja had been on the throne for four years, that news spread which filled Jhansi first with hope and then with rejoicing. The aged Peshwa, Baji Rao II, who had lost his throne and was living in retirement at Bithur, sent word that he knew of a suitable bride. She was beautiful, healthy, and of marriageable age by traditional Indian standards. Moreover, a famous astrologer had read her horoscope and declared with emphasis that she was destined to be a queen.

At first Gangadhar was non-committal in his reaction to the proposal, but when pressed by the Peshwa he sent a commission of ministers to see the girl. They were most impressed by her pleasing appearance and strong personality, and made an enthusiastic report. In a few weeks, the royal approval was given and the match was settled.

CHAPTER 2

Childhood of a Queen

The new Maharanee[1] of Jhansi came of a family respected by all who cherished independent Indian traditions. The original home of the Tambe family was Wai, a small town in Maharashtra which was famous on two counts. Being in mountainous country, and surrounded by dense forests and deep ravines, it was a stronghold of Mahratta freedom. From the time of Shivaji, who had founded the Mahratta kingdom in the seventeenth century, Wai had played a notable part in defying the Mogul armies, and its warriors had a high reputation.

It was also an intellectual centre. The Brahmins of the town were distinguished for their learning. In accordance with custom, they travelled round the country, engaging in philosophic disputations with other Brahmins, from which they returned in triumph, laden with honours and prizes.

The Tambes, who were Karhada Brahmins, made their mark both as warriors and as statesmen. Moropant Tambe, son of an officer in the Mahratta army, became the chief adviser to Chimaji Appa, brother of the last Peshwa, Baji Rao II. When the latter was deposed, Chimaji was offered by Lord Elphinstone a *jagir*, or land-holding, which yielded 2,000,000 rupees a year. On the advice of Moropant Tambe, in whom he placed complete confidence, he refused the offer, saying that he thought it unbecoming to be the pensioner of a foreign power.

Chimaji went to live at Benares, where he died in 1832, and

[1] The shorter title, Ranee, was always in general use.

was accompanied by Moropant and his wife. It would have been easy for Moropant to secure a post as minister in one of the Mahratta states, or a lucrative job under the British, who were in need of capable administrators and revenue officers; but he was a man of principle. 'It is better to die in honest poverty than to live in immoral prosperity,' he often said, and he stayed with Chimaji on a salary of 50 rupees—about five pounds—a month. He lived in a wing of a palace built by Chimaji on the southern bank of the Ganges.

His wife, Bhagirathi, is said to have been uncommonly beautiful. She was probably illiterate, like most women of her generation, but she had a keen intelligence, a good memory, and a considerable knowledge of the Hindu epics.

They had one child, a daughter whom they called Manakarnika, one of the many names of the holy river Ganges. She was known as Manu until her marriage, when her name was changed, as was usual, and she became Lakshmibai. The date of her birth is uncertain. Indian biographers give it as 1834 or 1835, but it is recorded that she went to Bithur with her father after Chimaji Appa's death in 1832. At the time of her marriage, which probably took place in 1842, her father is said to have been anxious because she had reached puberty without being betrothed. British writers say that she was about thirty when she died in 1858. For all these reasons, we can safely assume that she was born in, or close to, 1827.

The unlettered people who fought against the British under Lakshmibai's leadership saw a special significance in her birth 'in the lap of Mother Ganges'. To them she was the incarnation of the sacred river—purity personified—born to save them by destroying the heathen British who were polluting India by

making converts to Christianity. Certainly young Manu must have been shaped by the ideas attached to the river on whose sands she played during her earliest years.

This explains, in part, her meticulous observance of religious duties, her great respect for Brahmins, and her generous patronage of learning and art, all of which qualities marked her brief reign over Jhansi. Her courage and her aptitude for war can be traced to her grandfather, her keen intellect and diplomatic skill to her father, and her good looks to her mother.

A century ago, Benares was one of India's richest and most beautiful cities. It stands within a noble curve of the Ganges, and impressed every visitor, Indian or European—not by any regularity of design, but by the infinite variety of its architecture. 'Benares' is an anglicized form of the original name, Varanashi. According to legend, the city was built of gold, but turned to stone through the sins of its people. Then their continuing wickedness reduced a great part of it to clay and mud.

To the traveller approaching the city gates, the minarets of Aurangzeb's mosque and the residence of the Peshwa towered above all other buildings. Chimaji's palace, on the opposite bank of the river, contained seven spacious apartments rising one above the other. Covered galleries surrounded three sides of a small courtyard. 'The panels and pillars of the rooms were richly carved, their decorations being composed of rich carpets and silver vessels of various descriptions elaborately wrought.'[1] Today, little remains of the Ranee of Jhansi's birthplace. Its ruins are ignored and abandoned by the local people. The courtyard is overgrown with weeds, the fountains filled with rubble, the carved pillars buried under fallen masonry. The noise of owls and

[1] *Indian Empire* by Montgomery Martin.

the rustle of bats have replaced the pomp and ritual of the festivals of Daserah and Diwali, the bustle of Mahratta servants in their red turbans, the dancers and musicians who delighted Chimaji's guests, and the laughter of the children of his household.

Benares, when Manu was a child there, was a wealthy city. Its silks and shawls commanded a world market; its embroidery and filigree were known to connoisseurs both in Asia and in Europe. As a market, it attracted sellers of jewels and pearls from many parts of Asia. The bankers and diamond merchants of Benares provided an essential economic link between the various Indian states and rulers, and many of them were extremely rich. Although the streets were narrow, the tall buildings that lined them concealed stately gardens and spacious squares. Some of the secluded mansions, flanked by high towers and surrounded by cloisters of richly decorated stone, are remarkably beautiful.

Then as now, Benares was a place of pilgrimage. The ghats, or landing-places, were always thronged with people who had come to perform solemn ablutions or to devote themselves to prayer and meditation. The religious life of Benares began early each morning. Priests at the many temples started repeating passages from the Vedas for pilgrims who had come to pour holy Ganges water on the images of the gods or to make offerings at the shrines. Others strewed flowers in the temples, and the pavements near the gates were brilliant with baskets of large red, white, and yellow blossoms brought there for sale.

Benares was not only a centre of commerce and a holy city; it was also the principal seat of Brahminical learning, and British rule had not diminished its status in this respect. In the seminaries, celebrated scholars taught thousands of young boys to recite the Vedas and master the different systems of Hindu philosophy,

ethics, and logic. There was a strong tradition, which persists today, that all the religious merit of teaching the Vedas would be lost if the teachers were paid by their students; so they received generous gifts from rich pilgrims.

Little Manu Tambe went regularly to the Temple of Vishweshwar with her parents. She joined in the prayers and listened to the devotional music. But the stories of her childhood agree that she was far from docile. She would not take 'no' for an answer, and was difficult to control. These qualities were yet more in evidence after the Tambe family moved, while she was still a small child, to Bithur.

Here Moropant joined the exiled court of the last of the Peshwas, and his daughter, the future heroine of the Mutiny, made the acquaintance of three youngsters who were to play the leading parts in it—the Peshwa's son, Nana Saheb; Rao Saheb, Nana's nephew; and Tatya Tope. They were older than her, but her charm and beauty seem to have won their hearts. The old Peshwa, too, became particularly fond of her and called her *Chhabeli*, or 'sweetheart'.

With the boys, Manu flew kites, ran races, watched wrestling matches with keen interest, and learned to ride, shoot, and fence. With them, she also learned to read and write. Girls were not encouraged to do this, but she sat with the boys when they had their lessons. Among friends of her own sex, she played at housekeeping and always took the lead. She was the queen and the others had to be maids and servants, who were punished with a fine if they failed in their duties.

One story is of an elephant ride which the Peshwa's children were about to enjoy. Manu demanded a seat in the howdah, but the boys refused to have her. She began to cry, and her father

told her: 'You were not born to ride an elephant. Now keep quiet.' But Manu shouted at Nana Saheb: 'I'll show you! For your one elephant, I will have ten. Remember my words!'

Such a girl was clearly a fitting bride for a man of importance. Manu, when she reached the marriageable age of eleven or twelve, had plenty of suitors, but her father was looking for one who belonged to the Karhada Brahmin sect and whose horoscope did not clash with Manu's. Besides, the astrologers had always foretold a royal match for her. Time passed, and the worried Moropant met with accusing glances from his friends and sly remarks about his unmarried daughter. He was well rewarded by the proposal from the Maharaja of Jhansi.

CHAPTER 3

Brief happiness

The Maharaja's wedding was celebrated with great splendour in May 1842. Guns boomed a salute, fireworks blazed, and crowds gathered to shower roses and lilies on Gangadhar Rao and his bride. Tons of sugar and sweets were distributed to the people; hundreds of learned Brahmins were given money or costly shawls; there were robes of honour for vassal chiefs and state officials, and handsome presents for relatives of the bride. The astrologer whose prediction had made the marriage certain got a big reward. As for Moropant Tambe, he was given the rank of a Sardar of Jhansi, with an allowance of 3,600 rupees. Soon afterwards, he took as his second wife a lady of Jhansi, Chimabai.[1]

Manu's name had been changed in honour of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and victory. Lakshmibai—as she was now—joined her bridegroom in a grand procession through the city to the royal palace. She wore her family diamonds for the wedding, which followed the traditional form. The couple walked seven times round the sacrificial fire, and a priest bent to tie together the ends of their gowns. At this moment, Lakshmibai said in a clear, ringing voice: 'Make the knot very firm.'

[1] In 1858, when Jhansi was captured by the British, Moropant fled with his daughter. He urged his wife to hand over their young son to a trustworthy friend and commit suicide by throwing herself in a well, lest the soldiers outrage her modesty. However, Chimabai, guided by a woman of her family and carrying her two-year-old child, escaped from the city and walked the twenty miles to her parents' home at Gulsarai.

Some of the priests and the other guests were shocked by her boldness. A bride was expected to be shy and timid; apparently the new Ranee was wanting in good manners. But the general impression was favourable. Lakshmibai's words were understood as a declaration that she considered herself bound for ever to her husband and his people.

In 1851, the royal couple went on a pilgrimage to Benares. Lakshmibai took pleasure in revisiting the places where she had played as a child. She also worshipped in the temples where her parents had taken her, fed thousands of beggars and poor people, and made generous gifts to scholars and men of saintly reputation.

The Maharaja and his wife received a great welcome when they came home after an absence of six months. The streets were gay with the Mahratta flag, and almost the whole population turned out to see the royal procession, headed by twenty-one elephants and the household cavalry, on its way to the palace.

There was a special reason for the excitement. Reports had reached Jhansi that Lakshmibai was expecting a baby. After all the disturbing rumours about Gangadhar's private life, this was indeed a relief; and there was great rejoicing when the Ranee gave birth to a son.

The city, the palace, and the fort were brilliantly illuminated. The household troops put on a ceremonial parade, wearing gorgeous red uniforms and carrying long Mahratta lances. The State elephants were sent to all parts of Jhansi with loads of sugar to be distributed among the people, the traditional symbol of 'sweet news'. Public feasts were arranged, and thousands of the poor were given good meals and new clothes.

But Jhansi's happiness lasted only three months. The child died, and his parents were plunged into a sorrow that was shared by

all their people. Left without a male heir, the state was now in the midst of dangers from which it was never to escape.

The Maharaja was more acutely and anxiously aware of this than anyone. True, he could adopt an heir. The custom was well established in India, and the Peshwas, had they still been the overlords of Jhansi, would have approved or even suggested this course. But a different attitude was to be feared in the British, and especially in Lord Dalhousie, who had succeeded Lord Hardinge as Governor-General twelve months before. His policy was clearly one of spreading the bounds of British India. He had just annexed Satara, without the slightest moral or legal justification. Ganghadar was haunted by the prospect of his state vanishing from the map.

He became moody and irritable. He lost his appetite, the capacity to sleep, and, as one record expressed it, 'even the desire to live'. The courtiers and officials at first ascribed this change in their master to his deep and natural grief for his son; but the passage of a year brought no improvement. Indeed Gangadhar grew weaker, until in November 1853 he became seriously ill with pernicious dysentery.

Major Ellis, the Assistant Political Agent, hurried to the palace to see if the patient was being properly treated. He found Lakshmibai in personal charge of the nursing. Famous Indian doctors were in attendance, but the disease could not be checked.

The temples were filled with people offering special prayers for the Maharaja's recovery. Hundreds of Brahmins kept vigil and recited the Vedas. Free kitchens were opened for the poor, but even this act of practical piety was of no avail.

On 17th November Gangadhar lost consciousness, and everyone realized that the end was near. Ellis brought a British doctor

named Allen, but the patient refused to take foreign medicine. Allen prepared the medicine in Ganges water to purify it of the pollution that came from its having been touched by a non-Hindu, and the Maharaja was persuaded to take it; but when it was ready he again refused. Sir Edwin Arnold later wrote that Gangadhar might have lived 'to perpetuate a Hindu throne' if he had taken Dr Allen's medicine; 'but, although complacent in politics, he was orthodox'.

Next day, Moropant Tambe and the chief minister, Narasinhrao, mentioned the delicate but vital question of Jhansi's future. Gangadhar rallied to face the decision and sat up straight in his bed. 'I have not given up all hope of recovery,' he said, 'but I wish to adopt a boy according to our Hindu religion and custom.' The chosen heir was Anand Rao, son of Wasudeo Newalkar.

The adoption took place on 19th November with full traditional and religious ceremony. It was performed by a learned Brahmin, Pandit Vinayak, in the presence of all the notabilities of Jhansi and of the British Government's representatives, Major Ellis and Captain Martin. The child—given the new name of Damodar—sat on his adoptive father's lap, and the Maharaja put sugar into his mouth.

Damodar, who was five years old, was a member of the royal family and descended from Gangadhar's grandfather, a fact which made the adoption even more correct in Indian eyes than it would have been in any case.

The Maharaja then dictated his will, caused it to be read aloud, and handed it over to Major Ellis. In it he referred to the adoption as 'with reference to the second article of the treaty concluded with the British Government'. The will ended: 'Should I not

survive, I trust that in consideration of the fidelity I have evinced toward the British Government, favour may be shown to this child and that my widow during her lifetime may be considered the Regent of the State (*Malika*) and mother of this child, and that she may not be molested in any way.'

Major Ellis replied 'that he would do everything possible'. The Maharaja repeated his wishes in a letter to Major G. A. Malcolm, Political Agent for Gwalior and Bundelkhand, referring again to the treaty of 1817 which guaranteed the throne to Ramchandra Rao 'and his heirs and successors'.

Gangadhar Rao died on 21st November 1853. As W. M. Torrence wrote: 'He was allowed to die in the delusion that native fidelity would be remembered.'

THE STREAM WHERE THE RANEE FELL

THE RANEE'S SHRINE AT GWALIOR

THE TREE, NEAR THE STREAM WHERE THE RANEE FELL,
WHERE SHE WAS CREMATED

CHAPTER 4

'Rapacious policy'

If Lord North was the architect of American independence, and Hitler of the state of Israel, the Marquis of Dalhousie was in the same ironic sense the chief instigator of the Indian Mutiny. His family, the Ramsays, was among the oldest and proudest of Scotland's aristocracy; his father had been Commander-in-Chief in India. When Dalhousie was appointed Governor-General in 1847—a dignity he was to retain until 1856—he stipulated that he was to have 'entire and unquestioned possession' of his 'personal independence with reference to party politics'.

A man of boundless energy and self-confidence, and a first-rate administrator, Dalhousie was convinced of the wisdom of bringing as much territory as possible under direct British rule. As soon as he took office, he accepted the challenge of war with the Sikhs, defeated them, and annexed the Punjab. In 1852 he engaged in war with Burma and added the province of Pegu to the sprawling domain which he ruled from Calcutta. During his term of office he annexed eight Indian states whose rulers had died without leaving a lineal heir, though in one case his action was disallowed by London. His final stroke was the annexation of the important kingdom of Oudh, on the grounds of mismanagement by the Nawab.

At the time, this 'disastrous and rapacious policy', as Major Evans Bell called it in his book *The Empire in India*, earned Dalhousie nothing but congratulations in England. There was no Burke or Sheridan to demand the impeachment of the Governor-

General for the perfidy of his methods, no question raised in Parliament about their justification in international law or morality. All that counted was that he increased the annual revenue of the East India Company by £4,000,000 and that, as he wrote in his final report, 'four kingdoms have passed under the sceptre of the Queen of England, and various chiefships and separate tracts have been brought under her sway'. It was in approval of the conquest of the Punjab that Dalhousie was raised from the rank of earl to that of marquis. When he retired, he was welcomed in London with glittering ceremonial, loaded with honours, deluged with congratulatory addresses from public bodies, and given a pension of £5,000 by the Company, as if the accumulated wealth of eight years as ruler of India were not enough.

On the Company's Board of Directors, some criticism had been voiced in judiciously guarded language. But the public knew nothing of what was said in these private meetings. The nation, blinded by the glamour of conquest, forgot its natural moral instinct and was carried away by the enthusiastic approval of Dalhousie's record shown by Queen Victoria and her Ministers. On them, as well as on Dalhousie himself, rests the responsibility for the revolt which broke out within a year of his return and for thousands of lives lost in the atrocities committed by both Indians and British.

No part of Dalhousie's policy was so bitterly resented as the 'doctrine of lapse', by which he justified the annexation of states whose rulers left no heir. The idea may have seemed quite logical to a British nobleman, accustomed to European laws of descent by blood (Dalhousie had no son and his own titles became extinct on his death). But in India and elsewhere in Asia, a monarch's

right to select his successor was sanctioned by laws and customs accepted for centuries.

The doctrine originated with J. P. Willoughby, a Member of Council at Bombay and later knighted. The occasion was the death in 1848 of the Raja of Satara, a state bordering on Bombay Presidency. On his death-bed he had adopted a boy descended from the family of the great Mahratta ruler, Shivaji. The adoption, according to Hindu law and Mahratta custom, was entirely regular and proper. Willoughby, however, wrote a minute advancing the quite novel theory that the imperial power had a prerogative 'to refuse to recognize heirs by adoption'. He recommended that, whenever a ruler died without leaving a natural heir, his state should be annexed. And he stressed the importance of the Satara case as a precedent by writing:

'A more important question than that of the continuance or extinction of the Satara state has not arisen since I became a member of this government. It does not affect that state exclusively, but raises the general question of what is the right policy to be pursued towards any other native state of India under similar circumstances. In other words, it raises the question whether on the failure of heirs natural it is expedient to absorb them in the general sovereignty of the Anglo-Indian Empire, or to continue them by the Hindu custom of adoption.'

From the first, therefore, annexation by lapse was presented as expedient, not as legitimate. Sir George Clerk, Governor of Bombay, opposed Willoughby's view. The treaties with native states, he pointed out, recognized the rulers who signed them and their 'heirs and successors'. Analysing the standard text of such treaties, Sir George wrote: 'To judge from the expression of "perpetual friendship" to a man, "his heirs and successors",

these ordinarily would seem to mean a sovereignty which could not lapse for want of heirs, so long as there is anyone who can succeed according to the usages of the people to whom the treaty refers. The lad now adopted by the Raja is such a successor.' He admitted that 'adoption requires our sanction'; but this, he said, was only 'by custom'. Then he put a question which Lord Dalhousie never met: 'Can we, without injustice, exercise that right of sanction to the extent of prohibiting adoption?'

That might have been the end of Willoughby's doctrine had it not been rescued by Dalhousie, 'under whose fostering care', as Bell put it, 'the monster grew to such gigantic proportions and wrought such fearful havoc'. For the Governor-General, overruling Clerk, hailed Willoughby's minute as 'a textbook on adoptions'. Indeed, he 'was in the habit of referring to it when similar questions subsequently arose', according to a pamphlet called *A Vindication*, by Sir Charles Jackson, written in defence of Dalhousie's policy when the outbreak of the Mutiny evoked attacks on it.

In giving his decision, Dalhousie wrote: 'While I would not seek to lay down any inflexible rule with respect to adoption, I hold that on all occasions where heirs natural shall fail, the territory shall be made to lapse, and adoption should not be permitted, excepting in those cases in which some strong political reason may render it expedient to depart from this general rule.'

'I cannot conceive it possible', Dalhousie insisted, 'for anyone to dispute the policy of taking advantage of every just opportunity which presents itself for consolidating the territories which already belong to us, by taking possession of states which may lapse in the midst of them; for thus getting rid of those petty intervening principalities which may be made a means of

annoyance, but which can never, I venture to think, be a source of strength; for adding to the resources of the public treasury; and for extending the uniform application of our system of government to those whose best interests, we sincerely believe, will be promoted thereby.'

Satara, accordingly, was annexed. Jaitpur and Sambalpur followed in 1849. After that, Dalhousie's next opportunity was presented by the death of the Maharaja of Jhansi.

For Lakshmibai, the threat to the state was an added cause for distress in an already tragic situation. In the India of a century ago, to be a childless widow was almost a crime against the family and society. Widows were not only forbidden to marry again, but made to feel as ashamed of their position as if they had been to blame for the death of their husbands. Religious custom demanded that a widow must shave off her hair, wear a coarse one-colour sari, sleep without a mattress, and spend the rest of her life as a menial servant to her husband's family, despised and insulted by all, her very existence resented as that of an unwanted and useless survivor. No wonder many widows chose to commit suttee and die on their husbands' pyres.

A royal widow was not exempt. Lakshmibai was persuaded by her family to go to Benares and undergo the disfiguring ritual of having her head shaved. She was saved only because the British authorities, on some pretext no longer known, refused to permit the journey. She did scrupulously observe the funeral rites, and gave generous alms and donations for the salvation of her husband's soul.

But she did not abandon herself to grief for long. She was keenly aware of the responsibilities bequeathed to her by Gangadhar when he made her Regent of Jhansi and mother of a

five-year-old prince. With the fate of Satara in mind, she knew that Jhansi's survival depended on her. After consulting her father, she applied herself to the duty of administering the state efficiently and securing British approval of the adoption of Damodar.

Lakshmibai was quite equal to at least the first of these tasks. A week after her husband's death, Major Malcolm, the Political Agent, reported to Calcutta: 'The widow of the late Gangadhar Rao, in whose hands he has expressed a wish that the government should be placed during her life-time, is a woman highly respected and esteemed, and I believe fully capable of doing justice to such a charge.'

On taking up the position of ruling Queen, Lakshmibai put aside the custom of purdah. This was a startling innovation, but she knew that her people would be drawn closer to her if she showed herself openly to them. But she shrewdly maintained the purdah in her dealings with British officials. With them, the attitude on both sides must be stiff and correct. This was the more important since they had taken control of the state treasury, pending instructions from Calcutta, which put limits on her administrative freedom.

However, she carried on the business of the state and gave her subjects the help and guidance which they sought every day. She received them with graceful dignity, which, 'while it repelled familiarity, subdued even the rudest of the soldiers'. The people regarded her with veneration because of her moral purity and her devotion to their service. There was never any doubt, whatever order might come from Calcutta, that they accepted her as their queen.

Contemporary accounts by Vishnu Godse and others describe

how Lakshmibai spent her day. 'She rose as early as three in the morning, and after the usual ablutions devoted herself to religious meditation until eight. Then for three hours she supervised the work in the political and military offices; when it was finished, she distributed alms to the needy and distressed. She took her meal at midday and wrote 1,100 names of Rama (a religious custom still practised by devout Hindus) before again appearing in the court at three. The afternoon was devoted to the administration of the various departments of justice, revenue, and accounts, which lasted till sunset. The remaining hours of the evening were spent in listening to readings from the religious books. Then she went to sleep after a bath and a simple dinner.' It is a great contrast to some of the debauched and luxurious courts of India.

A British writer, Meadows Taylor, bears out this account: 'She had no affectations of personal concealment; and she sat daily on the throne of her deceased husband, hearing reports, giving directions, hearing petitions, and comporting herself as a brave-minded woman had to do in her position.' In Sir John Kaye's opinion, the Ranee was 'quite capable of discussing her affairs with a Commissioner or Governor. She knew when to restrain herself', he added,' and she tried to set bounds on her temper when conversing with a British officer'.

She certainly knew how to argue her case when she sent a petition to the Governor-General for the recognition of the boy Raja. She is said to have written it herself, the original version being in Persian. The document begins by referring to the treaties of 1817 and 1842, granted in recognition of the 'uniform and faithful attachment' to Britain of the ruling house of Jhansi. The second article of the treaty of 1817 confirmed the title of

Ramachandra Rao and his heirs and succesors, 'thereby meaning that any party whom he adopted as his son . . . would be acknowledged by the British Government as his successor, and one through whom the name and interests of the family might be preserved'.

The Hindu scriptures, continued the Ranee, 'inculcate the doctrine that the libations offered to the *manes* of a deceased parent are as efficacious when performed by an adopted as by a real son, and the custom of adoption is accordingly found prevalent in every part of Hindustan'. She then described in detail the formalities scrupulously observed at Damodar's adoption, the pains taken to have it witnessed by Major Ellis and Captain Martin, and the fulfilment by Damodar of his correct part in Gangadhar's funeral rites.

The petition closed with an especially telling argument. Adoptions made by three Rajas in the neighbourhood of Jhansi had been sanctioned by the Government, although the term 'perpetuity' did not occur in their treaties as it did in the treaties with Jhansi.

This point was also made by Ellis, who wrote to Malcolm on 24th December 1853, to support the validity of the adoption and urge the necessity of confirming it. 'We have', he wrote, 'a treaty of alliance and friendship with the Jhansi as well as the Orcha state, and I cannot discover any difference in the terms of the two which would justify our withholding the privilege of adoption from one state and allowing it to the other. The right of the native states to make adoption is most clearly acknowledged in paragraphs 16 and 17 of Despatch No. 9, dated 27th March 1839, from the Honourable Court of Directors; and it appears to me that it would be opposed to the spirit of enlightened liberality

which dictated those orders, if the privilege were now to be refused to families created by ourselves as a reward for the services rendered to the British Government.'

On 16th February 1954, the Ranee sent another petition to avert any misconstruction of the language used in the treaties. The words *warisan* (heirs) and *janishinan* (successors), she explained, 'refer to different parties; the term *warisan* being confined in meaning to natural or collateral heirs, while *janishinan*, on the contrary, refers to the party adopted as heir or successor to the estate in the event of there being no natural or collateral heir'. She rammed the point home: 'Treaties are studied with the utmost care before ratification; and it is not to be supposed that the term *janishinan* used in contradistinction to *warisan* was introduced in an important document of this kind, of the authority almost of a revelation from heaven, without a precise understanding of its meaning.'

One cannot but admire the skill of these petitions—accurate in their facts, clear in their logic, and moderate in tone. Lakshmibai had her Ministers to help her, but none of them had any training in law or knowledge of the English way of life. It is virtually true to say that this remarkable young woman entered single-handed on her contest with Lord Dalhousie—and, if he had ever had any intention of letting the decision depend on the merits of the case, she would have won it.

CHAPTER 5

A shield for expediency

Bad luck or bad faith—we do not know which—increased the odds, which were in any case heavily against Lakshmibai. Letters to Calcutta had to go through the hands of Major Malcolm, whose headquarters were at Gwalior. Her first petition was duly forwarded by Malcolm, who, in spite of his high opinion of her, added a recommendation that it should be refused. But the letter from Major Ellis, the man on the spot, warmly supporting the Ranee's case, was held up and reached Calcutta only after the Governor-General had made his decision.

During January 1854 Lord Dalhousie was away on tour, so provisional orders were sent to maintain the *status quo* in Jhansi. This, together with rumours of Ellis's sympathetic attitude, made the people think that things were likely to turn out well. Lakshmibai, however, thought the delay ominous, and her anxiety impelled her to send her second petition. By now Malcom had changed his mind, and forwarded the petition with a covering letter which was a recommendation in her favour.

On 27th February 1854, the Governor-General decided to reject the Ranee's plea and annex the state, and signed an order to that effect. The second petition and Malcolm's letter reached Calcutta the following day. Even if it had been likely that they would have turned the scale, Dalhousie was certainly not the man to reconsider a decision.

The annexation of Jhansi, in the judgement of Dr Nolan, terrified India's governing classes 'with the spectre of a relentless

centralization' and 'struck at the root of Hindu religion and cut out of Hindu law its highest and gentlest enactment'. Dalhousie, of course, saw the matter otherwise. In his accompanying minute, he justified his action on grounds of what he called 'sound policy' as well as by pseudo-legal arguments. 'That its incorporation with the British territories', he wrote, 'will be greatly for the benefit of the people of Jhansi, a brief reference to the results of experience will suffice to show.' Sir John Kaye was to comment acidly: 'The results of experience have since shown to what extent the people of Jhansi appreciated the benefit of that incorporation.'

In basing his action on this forecast Dalhousie was doubtless sincere, if appallingly mistaken. One cannot say the same of the rest of his case. Like many men who have wielded power, he was ready to use any tortuous argument, however open to refutation, as a shield for expediency. If the Willoughby doctrine was a sophistry in the first place, it was nothing to the jesuitical theory he now invoked. With an audacity equal to his cynicism, he pressed into his service an authority which the Ranee might well have quoted in support of her own case.

Lord Metcalfe was a universally respected statesman whose judgements on Indian affairs, and especially on the law of adoption, were regarded as highly authoritative. In a minute on the chiefs of Bundelkhand, he had drawn a distinction 'between sovereign princes and *jagirdars*, i.e. between those in possession of hereditary sovereignties in their own right and those who hold grants of land by a gift from sovereign or paramount power'. He held that the former 'have a right to adopt to the exclusion of collateral heirs' (and *a fortiori*, one would think, in case of failure), and that 'the British Government is bound to acknowledge the adoption, provided that it be regular and not in violation of

Hindu law'. On the other hand: 'With respect to chiefs, who merely hold lands or enjoy public revenue under grants such as are issued by a sovereign to a subject, the power which made the grant, or that which by conquest or otherwise has succeeded to its rights, is certainly entitled to limit succession according to the limitation of the grant, which in general confines it to heirs male of the body.'

Dalhousie decided to put Jhansi in the second category. 'Jhansi is a dependent principality', he wrote. 'It was held by a chief under very recent grant from the Government as sovereign; it is, therefore, liable to lapse to the Government that gave it on the failure of heirs male.' As a precedent to prove this assertion, he used the death of Ramachandra Rao in 1835: 'Although he had adopted a boy as successor the day before his death, the adoption was not recognized.'

The argument, which abounds in fallacies and distortions, has been effectively demolished by Indian writers such as Basu and Parasnis. But even a British writer of Dalhousie's day, Major Evans Bell, proved conclusively that the Raja of Jhansi was a hereditary sovereign. A *jagir*, essentially, was a position conferring income from land. There were literally thousands of *jagirs* in India; as we have seen, a *jagir* was offered to Chimaji Appa by way of a pension when his brother ceased to be Peshwa, though Chimaji had never been a ruler of any sort. In practice, a *jagirdar* might have power to order the lives of the peasants on his land, as Lord Dalhousie had to order the lives of his tenants in Scotland; and the line between the most dignified of *jagirdars* and the pettiest of princes was rather fine-drawn. But to apply the term to a considerable state such as Jhansi, with its own laws, administration, and armed forces, was as fantastic as it was insulting.

The throne of Jhansi had never been a gift from the British to Ramachandra Rao, because he was already in possession, as his dynasty had been since 1759. The treaty of 1817, which according to Dalhousie embodied the 'very recent grant', was only a revision of the treaty of 1804, and was necessitated, as the text made clear, because of the altered relations between Jhansi and the Peshwa. No claim was made that the Government and the Raja were in a relationship of sovereign and subject, for relations of amity and alliance had already been agreed on. The Marquis of Hastings, who was responsible for the treaty of 1804, had recorded that the ruler of Jhansi, 'who was a man of head as well as of courage, succeeded in making the Subedarship hereditary in his family'. Even the preamble of the treaty of 1807 speaks of 'the Jhansi Government' and of relations between 'the two Governments'.

J. M. Ludlow, in his *Thoughts on the Policy of the Crown towards India*, was emphatic in saying that in 1817 the Raja 'was the actual ruler of his territory; we had ourselves treated with his predecessors thirteen years before; he was already hereditary at the time we so acknowledged and constituted him. To speak of this as a grant from the British Government of the principality, and of the liability of that principality to lapse to the Government that gave it, is surely gross abuse of terms'.

Nor is there any substance in Dalhousie's version of what happened in 1835. The validity of the adoption—and indeed the very fact that it had taken place—were denied by the other claimants to the throne, as the British arbiter pointed out. There is no parallel with the adoption of 1853, whose validity was never challenged and which was formally reported to the British officials.

Finally, even in the case of a *jagir*, Lord Metcalfe had laid down

that the Government could only refuse to sanction a succession by adoption if the terms of the grant limited the succession to natural heirs. There was of course no such clause in any of the treaties with Jhansi.

There is in fact only one fitting summary of Dalhousie's real doctrine. It was

> '. . . *the good old rule, the simple plan,*
> *That they should take who have the power,*
> *That they should keep who can.*'

CHAPTER 6

Under British rule

No time was lost in drawing up the proclamation which put the seal on Dalhousie's decision. It stated airily that 'the Most Noble the Governor-General in Council has for several reasons declined to confirm and sanction' the adoption of Damodar Rao, and that the state had been 'taken under the charge of the British Government'. Therefore: 'It is incumbent on all the subjects of the said principality to consider themselves under the authority of the said Government and paying the revenue due by them' to the latter.

The duty of reading this document to the Ranee fell on Major Ellis, who would have done anything to avoid it, for he sympathized strongly with her and considered the annexation a flagrant breach of solemn promises. He arrived at the palace soon after eleven on the morning of 15th March 1854. The court was already agog with rumours, and the Ranee had held a brief consultation with her Ministers. Ellis found the household servants anxiously speculating about their future as they arranged the furniture in the audience hall.

An eye-witness wrote: 'Ranee Lakshmibai received the agent of Lord Dalhousie most courteously, separated by a purdah. When the British representative informed her of this heart-rending news that Jhansi henceforth ceased to belong to her, that it was incorporated with the domains of the mighty English, Lakshmibai in a loud yet melodious voice replied to the agent of the English in these few significant words:

"*Mera Jhansi nahin denge!*" '—'I will not give up my Jhansi!'

She was white with rage; her attendants feared that she might lose her temper and make a scene, but she controlled herself. Ellis did his best to be tactful. As the man now responsible for the administration of Jhansi, he told her that he would do everything in his power to see that she was properly provided for and treated with due respect by the British Government. The Ranee listened to him and thanked him for his kindness. But her real concern was not with her personal well-being; it was with the fate of her people and the good name of her family.

Her own position, however, was bound to cause her anguish. Not only was she a deposed ruler, deprived of power and unable to help the people who called her 'our mother'; not only were her dreams of acting as regent and seeing her adopted son on the throne shattered; but she was nothing more than a Hindu widow, doomed like so many others to an aimless and hopeless life. No words of sympathy were of any use to her. She dismissed her Ministers and attendants, shut herself in her bedroom, and wept bitterly. 'That day', it is recorded, 'she did not touch food or drink. Late in the afternoon she got up and began to pace the room like an angry tigress.'

Everywhere in Jhansi it was a day of mourning. The shops remained closed and no fires were lit. Thousands of people went to the palace barefoot and bareheaded, the Hindu sign of grief. Moropant Tambe, on his daughter's behalf, asked them to go home peacefully. 'All is not lost', he said. 'These are difficult times, but the Ranee will find a way out.' Brave words; but nobody knew what way out there could be.

Lakshmibai's courage was restored when she heard of the popular demonstration. Wiping away her tears, she cried: 'The

Ranee of Jhansi was not born to weep.' Then she summoned her advisers and asked them to think of ways to get Dalhousie's decision reversed.

There had recently been a sensational case before the courts, in which a wealthy Indian named Ayudha Prasad was accused of defrauding the supply department of the British Army. The defence counsel, John Lang, who had come specially to India, not only got his client acquitted but proved that the officers of the Commissariat were a bunch of scoundrels. Lakshmibai invited Lang to Jhansi; he seemed to be the very man to plead her cause. He advised her to appeal to London, and meanwhile to draw the pension which had been offered to her, but under protest and without prejudicing the rights of her adopted son.

At first Lakshmibai refused to follow this prudent course. 'I then pointed out to her', wrote Lang, 'as delicately as possible, how futile would be any opposition; and told her, what was the truth, that a wing of a native regiment and some artillery were within three marches of the palace; and I further impressed upon her that the slightest opposition to its advance would destroy her every hope and, in short, jeopardize her liberty.'

Lakshmibai, who was never too proud to take advice, did as Lang advised. She sent a mission to London, consisting of John Lytton and Lala Kashmiri Mull, who is described by her as 'my attorney of long standing'. This appeal cost her 60,000 rupees, but it did not succeed in changing the minds of the Court of Directors. On 2nd August 1854, they found that there was no reason to reverse the decision of the Governor-General.

Major Malcolm, who was supervising the transfer of the administration of Jhansi to British hands, submitted to Calcutta some proposals for the treatment of the deposed Regent, 'who

bears a very high character and is much respected by everyone at Jhansi'. These were:

'First, that a pension of 5,000 rupees should during her lifetime be paid to her monthly from the Treasury of Jhansi or at any place at which she may choose to reside. Second, that the palace at Jhansi should be made over to her for her residence and considered as her private property. Third, that during her lifetime she and her personal female attendants should be exempted from arrest and from the proceedings of our courts. Fourth, that, in compliance with her husband's last request, all the state jewels and private funds, and any balance remaining in the public treasury after closing the accounts of the State, should also be considered as her private property. Finally, that a list of the old adherents of the family should be prepared . . . with a view to their obtaining during their lifetime some stipends for their support.'

Dalhousie's reply showed his utter disregard for the feelings of the Ranee and her people. He approved all the proposals except the fourth, which he turned down for this reason: 'It is beyond the power of the Government so to dispose of the property of the Raja, which by law will belong to the son whom he adopted. The adoption was good for the conveyance of private rights, though not for the transfer of the principality.'

The treasury contained 245,738 rupees in gold and silver of different currencies, in addition to jewels and ornaments. Thus Lakshmibai was deprived of her husband's property by Dalhousie's invoking the very means that Gangadhar had chosen to safeguard her future—the adoption of an heir.

She remonstrated bitterly against this decision, and refused to accept the pension, which she considered an insult and a fraud.

J. C. Martin, an Englishman who was in Jhansi at the time, wrote later: 'She refused to the day of her death to receive the 5,000 rupees monthly granted to her as a pension.' According to Sir John Kaye, however, the Ranee at first refused the pension, but then took Lang's advice and reluctantly accepted it.

When the final accounts of the state were made out, Malcolm recommended the Government to hand over 1,000,000 rupees to Lakshmibai in accordance with the Maharaja's will. John Colvin, the Lieutenant-Governor (described by Kaye as 'a rather unsound and erratic statesman'), ordered that before this was done she should be asked to agree to repay her husband's debts out of her pension. She protested that she was not responsible for debts she had not incurred. Against the advice of Sir Robert Hamilton, Political Agent at Jhansi, Colvin persevered in what Kaye called his 'extraordinary meanness' and withheld part of the pension.

Lakshmibai moved out of the royal palace in Jhansi Fort and into the residence in the city allotted to her by the British. For the next three years, except for her efforts to enlist the support of influential Englishmen, her life was uneventful. But she was endearing herself still more to the people of Jhansi, to whom she spoke freely and without reserve. She was sharing in their sufferings and indignities, and her presence among them was a constant reminder of their humiliation and a challenge to their pride. An intense hatred for Britain was growing, and the men of Jhansi felt that they and their Ranee would be perfectly justified in taking up arms against the usurper. The annexation, they used to say, was worse than the murders committed by the thugs, who robbed and strangled people one at a time; for Dalhousie had put a noose round the necks of the whole people.

Lakshmibai was at one with her people in looking to the day of revolt. After the rejection of her appeal, she no longer listened to friends who speculated on a possible change of heart on the part of the Government. Her agents moved about freely and kept her informed of the preparations which were being made for a rising. When Nana Saheb came to Kalpi, a hundred miles from Jhansi, early in 1857, he was met by the Ranee's men, though the British officials at Jhansi knew nothing of his visit.

But, while she consolidated the loyalty of her people, she avoided any rash or isolated action, which could have been easily crushed. She was playing her hand with true Mahratta caution and astuteness. Towards the British she was reticent but correct, and careful to hide her resentment and anger. J. F. Holcomb wrote in his essay on Jhansi: 'So far as appearances went she was on terms of goodwill with the British officers at Jhansi, for as an Oriental, even when fierce wrath burned within her, she was able to set bounds to her temper and even to exhibit friendliness, when to do this required her to put an immense restraint on her real feelings.'

Two portraits of Lakshmibai at this period deserve quotation. Meadows Taylor wrote: 'In appearance she was fair and handsome, with a noble presence and figure and a dignified and resolute, indeed stern, expression, which appeared to have usurped the place of the peculiar softness which, when she was younger and had a good hope of a prosperous life, had distinguished her. . . . Her dress, though that of a woman, was not the ordinary costume generally worn by females of her class and position in life. On her head she had a small cap of bright-coloured scarlet silk with a string of pearls and rubies encircling and laced into it, and round her neck a diamond necklace sparkled, of not less value

than a lakh of rupees at least. Her bodice, freely opened in front, showed a well-developed voluptuous bust, and terminated at the waist, which was somewhat tightly drawn in by a belt worked over and embroidered with gold, and in it were ostentatiously stuck two elaborately carved silver-mounted pistols of Damascus make, together with a small but elegantly shaped hand-dagger, the point of which, it was whispered, had been dipped in a subtle poison, whereby a wound, however slight, must prove fatal. Instead of the usual cloth or petticoat, she wore a pair of loose trousers, from which protruded her small, prettily rounded bare feet.'

Lang, in his *Wanderings in India*, confessed that, having heard that the Ranee was a very handsome woman, he was 'very curious indeed to get a glimpse of her'. He described her as 'a woman of about middle size, rather stout but not too stout. Her face must have been very handsome when she was younger, and even now it had many charms—though, according to my idea of beauty, it was too round. The expression also was very good, and very intelligent. The eyes were particularly fine, and the nose very delicately shaped. She was not very fair, though she was far from black. She had no ornaments, strange to say, upon her person, except a pair of gold ear-rings. Her dress was a plain white muslin, so fine in texture, and drawn about her in such a way, and so tightly, that the outline of her figure was plainly discernible—and a remarkably fine figure she had'.

This was the woman who provided, in the eyes of the people of Jhansi, the alternative to the hardships of British rule. These were, within a short time, considerable. The Indian aristocracy and institutions were demolished at a blow. The establishments of the Maharaja's Government were replaced, the state troops

paid off. Each of the few British officials displaced a dozen Indian functionaries. Instead of the thousands of soldiers maintained by the Maharaja, there was a garrison a few hundred strong.

A decline in the traditional economy followed swiftly. There was little market now for the fine carpets, brasswork, and carved furniture of which Jhansi had boasted; craftsmen became idle along with the soldiers and shopkeepers. John Sullivan wrote: 'With the disappearance of the native court trade languished, the capital decayed, the people became impoverished while the Englishman flourished and acted like a sponge, drawing up riches from the Ganges and squeezing them down upon the banks of the Thames.'

The new rulers, who seem to have been unimaginative bureaucrats, outraged local opinion by sanctioning the slaughter of cows in the city. The Ranee and the people protested vigorously against this flagrant disregard of their religious beliefs; but their appeals met only with indifference and contempt.

Another insult concerned the Temple of Lakshmi outside the city walls, regularly visited by the royal family. One of Gangadhar Rao's ancestors had apportioned the revenue from two villages for the upkeep of this temple and the expenses of the ceremonies there; and the Deputy Commissioner under the new régime, Captain Gordon, sensibly recommended that this arrangement should continue. His superiors at Agra rejected his advice and deprived the temple of its income. In this case, too, an appeal by the Ranee was ignored.

A casual visitor, fresh to India, like John Lang could sum up public feeling. 'The people of Jhansi', he observed with confidence, 'did not wish to be handed over to the East India Company's rule.' But the officials who had done everything

possible to provoke a simmering hatred were blissfully unaware of the dangers they ran. 'I do not think there is any cause for alarm about this neighbourhood', reported Capt. Skene, the Political and Administrative Officer, on 18th May 1857. It was not long before he learned how wrong he was.

CHAPTER 7

Why the Mutiny?

The famous affair of the greased cartridges was the occasion for the Indian Mutiny; but it was no more the 'cause' of that immense upheaval than the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the cause of the first world war. The period since British power had been dominant in India was marked by great political changes, and moreover by profound social unrest and economic distress. The old order was fast dying out, and the new order had yet to find its roots. The events in Jhansi which we have recorded are a particularly dramatic instance of a process that affected the entire sub-continent.

Even more than today, India was overwhelmingly a peasant country. Under British rule, the prestige and authority which the village landlord had once enjoyed were taken over by the district collectors. The landlord whom the villagers had known had belonged to the same race as his tenants; both were tied to the soil, both were born, bred and cremated on the river bank as their forefathers had been for countless generations. The landlord in fact was connected with his tenants and their dependants by blood, language, belief and custom. These powerful ties and sympathies supplied the vital link between him and the village community he governed; but this link vanished over-night when the district officer arrived; and these officers, lacking the essential relationship, became irritating intruders in the body of Indian humanity.

How could it be otherwise? The British officer knew the people

only through the dead media of official files, statistical returns and quarterly reports; to him the inhabitants of his district were so many units or digits entrusted to his care. He was a complete stranger to them, and they, on their part, naturally regarded him as no more than a collector of revenue—'frigid, rigid and exacting'. In their official contact with him they missed the traditional dignity, the cultural and, above all, the personal touch of the old days. Gone were the flowing robes, the up-turned gold-embroidered shoes, the colourful turbans, the silver trays piled with betel nut and *pan*, the majestic hookah, and the graceful forms of greeting full of charming politenesses and literary allusions. In their place came an alien official who was aloof, looked stern, and worked with a 'time piece' on his desk and a pile of papers in front of him. Even the best among these officials, men like Bird and Thomason, often insulted the native gentry through ignorance if not through intentional discourtesy. A popular couplet expressed the Indian feeling of humiliation and resentment:

> '*They looked at our labour and laughter*
> *as a tired man looks at flies;*
> *And the load of their loveless pity is*
> *worse than ancient wrongs.*'[1]

Holt Mackenzie's report brings out the administrative attitude most eloquently. He writes: 'Instead of taking the people as they existed, we forced them into all incongruous positions to meet inapplicable laws; and their properties were necessarily thrown into a state of indescribable confusion, from a system of revenue-management conducted without judicial investigation, and of judicial decision without revenue knowledge.'

[1] Asoka Mehta: *1857: The Great Rebellion.*

In addition, government machinery in the first half of the nineteenth century was not particularly efficient and did not expand sufficiently quickly to meet new demands. Whenever new territories were brought under British control the strain on the administration was so heavy that the resulting chaos led, as Colonel Malleson admits, to 'a very bad feeling and to many agrarian outrages'. Several districts in Central India and Bengal, and considerable areas around the Sahyadri mountains, were in a state of permanent unrest and did not accept British rule without resistance.

The economic impact of British rule on the Indian people was equally severe. It disrupted the existing village economy and ruined the trade and crafts of almost the whole country.

The introduction of railways made perhaps the biggest inroad on the Indian economy, since they flooded the shops and stores with cheap Manchester-made cotton goods and Sheffield-made knives, nuts, bolts and hinges. This led to the gradual closing down of the handloom industry and the extinction of the village smithies. With the weaver going out of business a host of dependent trades such as carders, sizers, dyers, loom makers and carpenters became out of work and destitute. The blacksmith too soon lost his custom, and a general decline in almost every sort of craft and skill set in.

As the British power spread and the administration became more and more centralized, the maintenance of large armies became less necessary, and soon the safety-valve of employment in the forces began to close. The annexation of the Kingdom of Oudh, to take one instance, was followed by the disbanding of the state Army, and 60,000 men were rendered idle. The same thing happened when Nagpur and Jhansi were absorbed in the

Company's Raj. Thousands of disbanded soldiers returned to their homes, and became a burden to their families, already hard pressed to make both ends meet. The patch of land which was barely enough to sustain a family of seven or eight now had to carry the burden of ten or twelve. As time went on the crop yields became progressively poorer (which is always the way when an agricultural system is subjected to sudden strain); yet the exactions of the British tax-collectors grew more systematic and heavier, with the result that the helpless peasant was thrust into the clutches of the unscrupulous money-lender. Soon hundreds of thousands were reduced to utter destitution.

This economic impact of British rule changed the even tenor of Indian social life with brutal suddenness. The process of disintegration was accentuated by the disrupting aspects of Lord Dalhousie's administration which showed little respect for religious susceptibilities and political sentiments.

'It must be admitted,' wrote Sir William Lee-Warner, 'that even the most ignorant and apathetic Hindu was brought into more conscious touch with the spirit of the West during the eight years preceding 1857 than at any other period in the history of India.'[1] This 'spirit of the West' meant more than social reforms such as the abolition of suttee and the outlawing of thuggery. It meant a determined attempt at the conversion of the 206,000,000 people of India to Christianity. It seems hard to believe that such a responsible person as Mr Mangles, the Chairman of the East India Company, should have declared in the House of Commons:

'Providence has entrusted the extensive empire of Hindustan to England in order that the banner of Christ should wave triumphant from one end of India to the other. Everyone must exert

[1] *Life of Lord Dalhousie.*

all his strength that there may be no dilatoriness on any account in continuing in the country the grand work of making all Indians Christians.'

Syed Ahmed Khan gives many instances to show how the Christian missionaries eagerly collected thousands of children in the great famine of 1837, and baptized them into the Christian faith without the consent or knowledge of their relatives.[1]

The common man in India, Hindu and Mohammedan alike, was convinced that the British would surely Christianize the whole country if something effective was not done to check the missionaries. At such a psychological moment the 'greased cartridges' were the proverbial last straw on the camel's back. A rumour spread that the cartridges for the new Enfield rifles were greased with fat made from cows and pigs—the first animal sacred to the Hindus, and the second animal abhorred and detested by the Mohammedans. Whether the Indian soldier's resentment against the new cartridges was justified or not is less to the point than the fact that the Government had already given him enough proof of its determination to destroy his faith. The cartridge brought to a head the discontent and suspicion of the already restive army.

The Mutiny put an end to official proselytizing, but for many years British opinion went on believing that the chief mission of Britain in India was to spread the Gospel. To responsible men such as Lord Shaftesbury, this was both a Christian duty and a powerful political weapon. The *Friend of India*, a newspaper which was one of Dalhousie's strongest supporters, wrote: 'The Government of India has never yet awoke to the fact that Christianity is the only means of consolidating our power in

[1] Khan: *Asab-e-Bagawat.*

India. With THAT our military expenditure may be reduced to £5,000,000.' In the opinion of the *Guardian*, 'our government of India will never be secure until we can convert the people of India'.

Lastly, among the immediate causes of the Mutiny must be mentioned the deep sense of injustice felt by the disinherited princes and Talukdars. In Indian society they were highly respected and powerful men who were unlikely to accept their fate without a fight. When the Bengal soldiers rose against the British, these dispossessed princes and landlords quickly threw their weight and influence on the side of the rebel forces and made common cause with them.

For various reasons the revolt was crushed; but it succeeded in as much that the people were given a solemn pledge by the Sovereign, Queen Victoria, that their faiths would not be meddled with, and that the Hindu princes should have the right to adopt heirs and thus ensure the continuity of their states. In the military sense India lost the battle, but in a different sense she won her objective by asserting the right to spiritual freedom; and this spiritual freedom eventually led to her political independence.

From the beginning of 1857 there were sporadic incidents among Indian troops in Bengal, who refused to accept the new cartridges. On 9th May, eighty-five cavalrymen at Meerut, guilty of this offence, were publicly stripped of their uniforms and marched to prison to begin ten-year sentences. The rising may be dated from 10th May, when the garrison of Meerut openly mutinied, shot their officers, and released their imprisoned comrades. Then they marched to Delhi, twenty-five miles away, to be welcomed by the population. The aged ex-Emperor was put

back on the Mogul throne and Delhi became the rebel headquarters.

Later in the month the news reached the Ganges cities and the recently annexed kingdom of Oudh, where resentment was at its most intense. By the first week of June, the rebels had seized Lucknow, the capital of Oudh (except for the residency, where the British were besieged), Cawnpore, Sitapur, and other towns. 'In the course of ten days,' says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'English authority in Oudh practically vanished.' Benares and Allahabad also rose, but unsuccessfully.

A great stretch of northern India thus passed out of British control, and divided their capital, Calcutta, from their only effective forces, which were in the Punjab. Lord Canning, the Governor-General, had scarcely any British or loyal troops at hand until he withdrew some from Burma and intercepted others which were on their way to China. But Sir John Lawrence, who commanded in the north-west, was able, as he put it, to 'hurl the Sikh at the Hindu'. Under his orders he had a strong force of Sikhs, Pathans, and Gurkhas, as well as 3,000 British troops and some artillery.

Over the southern half of India—the Bombay and Madras Presidencies—the Indian soldiers remained passive, but the British did not dare to use them against the rebels and were content that all was quiet.

Jhansi was on the fringe of this British-held territory. The liberated regions round Delhi and in Oudh were not far away; but immediately to the north was the important kingdom of Gwalior, whose ruler failed to join the rebellion although some of his troops threw off their allegiance to him.

As we have seen, the Political and Administrative Officer at

Jhansi, Captain Alexander Skene, viewed the local situation with complacency—though one may suspect a trace of whistling to keep up his courage in his reports to his superior at Agra. His trust in the Ranee, at all events, was complete. After the outbreak of the Mutiny at Meerut, he readily agreed when she asked permission to enlist a body of armed men for her own protection in the event of a sepoy mutiny.

Of this Skene had, or at least betrayed, no fears. 'The troops here, I am glad to say, continue staunch and express their unbounded abhorrence of the atrocities committed at Meerut and Delhi,' he wrote on 18th May. 'I am going on the principle of showing perfect confidence, and I am quite sure I am right.' On 30th May he admitted: 'There is of course a great feeling of uneasiness among the moneyed men of the town, and the *thakurs* (descendants of Bundela freebooters) . . . are beginning, it is said, to talk of doing something.' But he concluded: 'All will settle down here, I feel perfectly certain, on the receipt of intelligence of success.' No such intelligence, however, was to reach him.

Skene might have taken warning when two bungalows in the military cantonment were destroyed by fire, something which had been a signal for mutiny in Meerut and several other places. However, the fires were put down to accident and there is no record of any precautions taken by the British. On 3rd June Skene reported: 'We are all safe here as yet.'

The garrison, commanded by Captain Dunlop, consisted of part of the 12th Bengal Native Infantry and the 14th Irregular Cavalry. On the afternoon of 5th June, a company of the former, led by a sergeant named Gurbaksh Singh, marched into the 'Star Fort' and announced their intention of holding it. Named from

its shape, this fort was a walled enclosure within the cantonment and contained the magazine and the treasure-chest.

The mutineers were supported by the Indian gunners. As they marched to the fort, people cheered and threw bunches of marigolds, a token of good wishes. The sympathies of the town were immediately obvious.

In the cantonment, there were only eight British people. Captain Dunlop had with him his officers, Lieutenants Taylor and Campbell, Quartermaster-sergeant Newton, and Conductor Reilly; and with Newton were his wife and two children. The rest of the white community lived in the Civil Station. Except for Skene and the District Magistrate, Captain F. D. Gordon, whose bungalows were inside the city, within ten minutes' ride of the Fort and the palace, both the Cantonment and the Civil Station were outside the city wall to the south. The British and Eurasian residents in the Civil Station numbered sixty—twenty-six men, fifteen women, and nineteen children.

Captain Skene's letters clearly suggest that the outbreak of the Mutiny at Jhansi took the British authorities completely unawares. However, now that the unexpected had happened, Skene realized the gravity of the situation and ordered the removal of all the European, Eurasian and Christian families to the City Fort before nightfall.

On hearing the news about the Star Fort, Captain Dunlop with his fellow officers rushed to hold an inspection parade of the garrison troops. He found that only thirty-five of his men had mutinied. The remaining four companies readily promised to stand by their British officers; but it was not long before he discovered that all the troops had turned against him, whatever their promises.

THE RANEE OF JHANSI
(from contemporary painting by a local artist)

Courtesy the India Office Library

GENERAL SIR HUGH ROSE

British writers have condemned the sepoys' conduct as treacherous and from their standpoint undoubtedly it was so. But allowances have not been made for the abnormal conditions then prevailing in the country. The sepoy was convinced that the East India Company was cheating him by selling *atta* (wheat flour) mixed with ground bones. He was equally convinced that cows' and pigs' fat had been used in making the cartridges issued to him. He did not think, therefore, that when he was promising to stand by the British he was consciously committing an act of treachery. To his simple mind it was a case of 'tit-for-tat'. If the 'Honourable' Company was prepared to use greased cartridges to convert him to Christianity and have the audacity to deny blandly the use of fat in their manufacture, why should he not give any promise to suit his purpose and break it at the proper moment? '*Cumpani Sarkar choronki jamat hai*' (The Company's Government is a gang of thieves), was a common saying among the sepoys. The fact was that he simply did not have confidence in his European masters, who had, according to his belief, broken their solemn promise of respecting his gods and religion. He regarded himself as freed of any obligation towards his British officer once he was convinced that the latter represented a government which was no better than a common cheat. At the same time he thought that to act 'treacherously' was to defend his religion, surely a higher duty than loyalty to a foreign master.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the sepoys, when questioned by their officers, professed to be outraged at the conduct of their comrades in the Star Fort and vowed 'eternal loyalty' to the British. They were probably also apprehensive as to their fate; they had heard that two regiments of sepoys at Calcutta had been blown away from guns for alleged mutiny. The next morning

they repeated these promises and protestations of loyalty, which encouraged Captain Dunlop and his brother officers to think that all was not lost and that possibly they could bring the mutinous company under control again.

These hopes were shattered in a matter of hours. All the troops joined the mutiny, and their first act was to kill their officers. The only survivor of the British party in the cantonment was Lieut. Taylor; he was badly wounded, but managed somehow to reach the City Fort. Meanwhile the mutineers, covered with dust and blood, went to the jail and released the prisoners, who joined them in fanatical excesses, burning and wrecking public offices and plundering at random.

Dunlop's last attempt to save the situation had been to write to the rulers of two nearby states, Tehri and Datia, asking for help. There was no answer, though the prince of Datia was hardly a mile-and-a-half away. Only one hope of escaping a cruel death remained. The British had to appeal to the one person capable of establishing a respected authority in Jhansi and curbing the mutineers—to Lakshmibai, 'the woman they had so grossly wronged', as Kaye remarked.

According to Vishnu Godse's book, *My Travels*, which is a first-hand account, Capt. Gordon and others called on the Ranee with this plea: 'It seems certain that to-morrow the worst will happen to us. We suggest that you take charge of your kingdom and hold it, along with the adjoining territory, until British authority is re-established. We shall be eternally grateful if you will also protect our lives.'

This, however, the Ranee could not do.

CHAPTER 8

Massacre

The events of the next few days are the subject of controversy, and different versions have been put forward. It will be best for the sake of clarity to begin by outlining the uncontested facts, and then to examine the evidence on points in dispute.

The sepoys, with the released convicts and others who had joined them, laid siege to the City Fort on 7th June. The small band of Englishmen defended themselves with the heroism of despair, but the sheer weight of numbers prevailed. Next day saw an intensified attack, supported by guns, and the capture of the lower outworks of the Fort. Capt. Gordon was shot through the head while looking out of a window over the gate. He had been 'the life and soul of the garrison', and his loss completely demoralized his comrades.

Skene now made signs that he was ready to surrender. The rebels collected near the gate. Through an Indian doctor, Saleh Mohamed, they promised by the most sacred oaths that the besieged would be allowed to leave in safety if they surrendered the Fort and laid down their arms. When Skene agreed, the gates were opened and the English and Eurasians filed out with their personal belongings, expecting to be interned in the Star Fort. The men were bound, but the women and children were treated with consideration.

When the captives reached the Jokhan Bagh, just outside the city walls, a message arrived from the leader of the Jhansi mutiny, Risaldar Kala Khan, ordering all the Europeans to be put

to death. No further invitation was needed by the crowd of fanatics, jailbirds, and disaffected policemen who followed the helpless prisoners. The Indian servants who had stayed with their masters were pushed aside. The women and children were separated from the men, and almost all lost their lives in a general massacre.

The official report by Capt. Pinkney records: 'Bakshish Ali, jail *darogah*, first cut down Captain Skene with his own hand. Mrs McEgan, attempting to save her husband, threw her arms round him, but was beaten and pushed aside and Dr McEgan was cut down and killed. Mrs McEgan cast herself on his body and was there killed also. Miss Browne fell on her knees before a sepoy, and begged for her life, but was immediately cut down by him. I have no particulars regarding the deaths of the rest of our unfortunate countrymen and their wives and children, but all were put to death in the Jokhan Bagh, with the exception of Mrs Mutlow, who had concealed herself in the town, disguised in native apparel.'

This massacre, and especially the killing of innocent women and children, were quite needless and are rightly condemned by both Indian and British authorities as a crime against humanity. But to explain it, and similar happenings at Cawnpore and elsewhere, one must seek other reasons than irrational savagery. Nothing of the sort had happened in the first days of the Mutiny, and cases of Europeans being protected from mobs of riff-raff by the sepoys were not uncommon.

By the time the revolt spread to Jhansi, the rebels had been set an example in ruthlessness by their enemies. Soon after the outbreak in Meerut, a British force under Colonel Neill and Major Renaud left Calcutta for Benares, arriving there on 3rd June.

Neill gave written orders to Renaud 'to attack and destroy all places *en route* close to the road occupied by the enemy'. In Fatepur, a town which had rebelled, the Pathan quarter was destroyed *with all its inhabitants.* Everywhere, says Kaye, the column left 'traces of the retributory power of the English in desolated villages and corpses dangling from the branches of trees'.

At Benares worse was to come. According to Bholanath Chandra's *Travels of a Hindu*, 6,000 people were put to death. 'For three months', writes Chandra, 'eight death-carts daily went their rounds from sunrise to sunset to take down the corpses which hung at the crossroads and market-places'. Holmes says: 'Old men who had done us no harm, and helpless women with sucking infants at their breasts, felt the weight of our vengeance.'

With a few honourable exceptions, British writers have dwelt avidly on Indian atrocities and passed over the barbarities of their compatriots. This is as true of historical works as it was, more understandably, of private diaries and memoirs and of official reports. As Prof. R. C. Majumdar, the *doyen* of modern Indian historians, says: 'While every schoolboy both in India and England reads about the cruel massacre of English men, women and children at Cawnpore, very few outside the circle of historians of modern India have any knowledge of the massacre, in cold blood, of Indian men, women and children, a hundred times the number of those that perished at Cawnpore.' He comments: 'Historical truth and political fair play both demand that the veil should be drawn aside and an objective study made of the atrocities on both sides.'

At the time of the outrages for which Neill was responsible, most of the country between Benares and Jhansi was in rebel

hands. It is reasonable to suppose that the ghastly news had reached Jhansi by 8th June and was at least one cause of what happened on that day.

The historians are chiefly at odds, however, over the part played by Lakshmibai. British writers of the day, such as Dr Lowe, Montgomery Martin, Dr Sylvester, and Col. Malleson accuse her of full responsibility for the massacre and depict her as a malevolent spirit revelling in cruelty and murder. To them 'She was a heathen; the forgiveness of injuries was no article in her creed'; 'The Ranee of Jhansi was an ardent, daring, licentious woman'; 'The Jezebel of India . . . the young Ranee upon whose head rested the blood of the slain'; 'The Ranee, like Nana Saheb, never forgave that which she considered an insult and an outrage. Powerless, she nursed her resentment, until the Revolt of Meerut and the seizure of Delhi gave her the long-wished-for opportunity. She then, in June 1857, gained to her cause the sepoys stationed at Jhansi, enticed the English officers and their families to accept her protection, and had them foully murdered.'

If we trace back the origin of these statements, we come across Mr Thornton, the Deputy-Collector. Writing on 18th August, he states it as the 'general impression' that the mutineers, after killing their own officers and plundering the treasury, were going off; and it was 'wholly at the instigation of the Jhansi Princess, with a view to her obtaining possession of the district, that they, together with other armed men furnished by the Ranee, attacked the fort'. He adds that they induced the Europeans to surrender, by solemnly swearing to allow them to depart unmolested; notwithstanding which, 'they allowed them to be massacred by the Ranee's people in their presence, in a most cruel and brutal manner, having no regard to sex or age. For this act, the mutineers are

said to have received from her 35,000 rupees in cash, two elephants, and five horses'.

This is all rather imprecise. The case against the Ranee is founded on the report submitted to the Government by Capt. J. W. Pinkney, the Commissioner, on 20th November 1858. This is a source used by all the official historians. Pinkney's story, however, has been considerably embellished over the years.

Kaye, for instance, shows the Ranee as the instigator of the mutiny on 6th June. 'Early in the afternoon', he writes, 'the Ranee and a crowd of people . . . went in procession from the town to the cantonment. . . . Then the troops rose at once and fired on their officers.' But the crowd in Pinkney's report appears as 'a great number of people amongst whom were the Ranee's principal adherents'. And a letter written that very day by Capt. Gordon, and found by Sir Robert Hamilton, makes no reference to either the Ranee or her adherents.

On 8th June according to Malleson, 'the Ranee sent messengers to the Fort under a flag of truce, demanding a parley. Captain Skene responded. The native messengers then declared that the Ranee wanted only the Fort . . .' and then come the agreed terms set out above. Pinkney wrote simply: 'Risaldar Faiz Ali wrote to the garrison to say that if they vacated the Fort they would not be injured.' He would surely have stated that the Ranee gave the safe conduct, had it been so.

After the suppression of the Mutiny the British, who naturally had every interest in discrediting the Ranee's memory, held an inquiry into the Jhansi massacre. Scores of people, many of them only remotely connected with the events, were questioned. This evidence, now available in the National Archives at New Delhi, has been the subject of exhaustive studies by two eminent

scholars, Dr Surendra Nath Sen and Prof. Majumdar. The former concludes: 'The testimony produced to bolster up this charge was based mostly on hearsay, and the witnesses contradicted themselves even in matters of personal knowledge.'

One witness was Skene's cook, who claimed to have been twice condemned to death by the rebels and twice saved by a lucky accident, and whose story, says Dr Sen, 'has all the flavour of fiction'. He related that on 6th June Skene sent his family to the Fort and then went to Gordon's bungalow. Gordon's servant, however, remembered going with his master in Skene's buggy, which had been sent to them empty, to the town gate where they met Skene—and his family!

The cook accused Moropant Tambe of active association with the mutineers, and said that Lakshmibai went to visit their leader after the massacre. No other witness supported this story. Gordon's servant quoted, and claimed to have read, an excited letter from the Ranee to Gordon, which he carried after taking one from Gordon to her. 'What can I do?' wrote the Ranee in an uncharacteristic style, 'Sepoys have surrounded me and say I have concealed the gentlemen, and that I must get the Fort evacuated and assist them. To save myself I have sent guns and my followers. If you wish to save yourself, abandon the Fort; no one will injure you'. A competing witness also claimed to have carried this letter, but knew nothing of its contents. And another letter turns up in the evidence of Mrs Mutlow, an Indian Christian who escaped the massacre. At the time of the surrender, she said, Skene sent the Ranee a letter from a leader of the mutiny promising a safe conduct, and asked her to sign her name to it. When she did so and returned it, 'everybody agreed to leave'.

It would have been quite contrary to custom for an Indian

ruler to write in the first person or to sign a letter. The Ranee used her seal in all her correspondence (a fact of which Mrs Mutlow was naturally ignorant) and Skene was doubtless more familiar with her seal than her signature, and would have asked for it.

A Bengali clerk, quoted by many British historians, recalled that he was made prisoner and brought before the Risaldar, and that he heard the Ranee say she 'would not have anything to do with the British swine'. It is hard to believe that he ever got close enough to Lakshmibai to overhear her words. In any case she always spoke Marathi, and in that language 'swine' is not a word of abuse. There is no record of this clerk's name or of when and to whom he made his report.

Thus there is no convincing evidence that the Ranee was to blame for the massacre or that she issued a safe conduct which she meant to be dishonoured. Majumdar observes: 'While the historians felt no hesitation in accepting the Ranee's guilt as definitely proved by the incriminating statements of these witnesses, they never allude to the points in her favour. Nor do they seem to have considered the evidence collected by Sir Robert Hamilton in April 1858.' Hamilton, in fact, did not accuse her of complicity with the rebels.

Let us turn, then, to the 'points in her favour'. Parasnis has published a letter from T. A. Martin, who was apparently one of the besieged Englishmen and managed to escape the massacre. He wrote to Damodar Rao in 1889: 'Your poor mother was very unjustly and cruelly dealt with—and no one knows her true case as I do. The poor thing took no part whatever in the massacre of the European residents of Jhansi in June 1857. On the contrary she supplied them with food for two days after they had gone

into the Fort—got a hundred matchlock men from Kurrura, and sent them to assist us, but after being kept a day in the Fort they were sent away in the evening. She then advised Major Skene and Captain Gordon to fly at once to Datia and place themselves under the Raja's protection, but this even they would not do; and finally they were all massacred by our own troops.'

According to Vishnu Godse, her reply to Gordon, when he came to appeal to her on 6th June, was distinctly chilly. Godse reports her thus: 'In peacetime when I asked for my kingdom, you refused to give it, and now that you cannot keep it you are handing it over to me! You did not think it necessary to invite me for consultation when you decided the fate of Jhansi in your council at Calcutta. . . . The best thing for you will be to look after yourselves. The Indian troops will burn and destroy me altogether if I give you protection. You had better save your lives as best you can.'

Indeed, Lakshmibai's own position at this confused moment, though full of opportunity, was far from safe. The sepoys might well have turned their arms against her if she had given grounds for the charge that she was concerned to help the British. The offer which, Godse says, she made to Gordon was probably as much as realism permitted. She promised to shelter the British women and children in her palace.

There, the fugitives were given a wing of the building; guards were posted to protect them; and they were provided with beds, food, and water. But their husbands removed them to the Fort just before it was encircled. This change of plan was to prove foolish and disastrous.

On 7th June, the British again sought Lakshmibai's good offices. Capt. Scott and two others were sent by Skene to ask her

to guarantee them a safe conduct if they surrendered. On their way to the palace, however, they were caught by the rebels and killed. Skene sent her other messages begging for help. Indian accounts say that she replied generously, saying that she would do her best to help even though she knew she would be robbed and plundered of everything she possessed if she did so openly. She sent a hundred matchlock men from Kurrara (as Martin recalled) into the Fort; but next morning the English sent them back, to her bewilderment. She is also credited with having sent in a supply of bread under cover of darkness.

To what extent Lakshmibai was impelled by kindness and chivalry, and how much by a shrewd calculation that it might yet be useful to her to stand well with the British, it is impossible to say. In the short run, at all events, the foreigners in Jhansi were doomed. By nightfall on 8th June there were only two centres of power—Risaldar Kala Khan, the sepoy leader, and the Ranee.

CHAPTER 9

Uneasy peace

Delhi, the traditional capital, was by now the centre of an India in revolt. The last British stronghold there had surrendered; the Emperor was on his throne; and soldiers who had mutinied at all the surrounding military stations were converging there. Risaldar Khan, too, ordered his men to march to Delhi, a decision of which Lakshmibai heard with relief. The sepoys, however, were short of funds. They marched in a body to the palace and proclaimed their intention of leaving the state in the hands of the Ranee, provided that she would give them 300,000 rupees in cash as a reward for their having freed Jhansi from the British.

Lakshmibai was presented with a difficult decision. She was sincerely appalled by the cruelty the rebels had shown; and, delighted as she was at the prospect of being once more an independent ruler, her aim was to make this position a lasting one. This depended on avoiding an unnecessary clash with the British, which would be inevitable if she accepted the throne at the hands of the sepoys and moreover financed their future career.

She held long discussions with her Ministers, sought her father's advice, and awaited a sign from the goddess Lakshmi, the principal deity of her family. The Brahmins covered Lakshmi's golden image with flowers and watched, chanting sacred texts, to see on which side the first flower would fall. They reported with amazement: 'After six hours a flash of light blazed all around us and two flowers came down from the goddess' two ears, one

to the right and one to the left at exactly the same moment.' Nobody knew how to interpret this omen.

Meanwhile the sepoys increased their pressure. They threatened to blow up the palace, and issued a proclamation that 'the people belong to the gods, the country to the Emperor, and the two religions govern'. Less vaguely, they invited Sadasheo Rao[1] to take over the government. This threat forced the Ranee to make a decision. She consented to take power, but declined to help the sepoys with money. Using all her tact and womanly guile, she explained that the British had reduced her to utter poverty and that it was unworthy of brave warriors like themselves to make demands on a woman in distress. This appeal had some effect on the rebels, but still they declared that they would give the Jhansi throne to Sadasheo Rao if they were not sufficiently recompensed. At last she agreed to pay them 100,000 rupees and persuaded them to leave Jhansi immediately, which they did the same evening.

The Ranee had not hesitated to express to the rebels her horror at their butchery of European men, women and children. Her first act after the departure of the sepoys was to collect and bury the bodies of the murdered Europeans and help those few Christians and Anglo-Indians who, by some chance, had managed to escape the massacre.

The task of clearing the chaos and confusion bequeathed by the sepoys was not easy. They had burned the administrative offices

[1] Sadasheo Rao, Gangadhar Rao's nephew many times removed, came from Parola in East Khandesh, where the ruling family of Jhansi had some landed property and a palace. The sepoys used him as a pawn in their negotiations with the Ranee and dropped him as soon as they came to terms with her.

in the city and all the public records and documents essential to any government. The Ranee had to start, therefore, from scratch. She called a conference of representatives of all castes, creeds and classes to help her restore peace and order. Aristocrats, landlords, bankers, merchants, craftsmen and workers assembled to discuss the best way to bring Jhansi back to normal. It took the new administration a few weeks before a police force could be organized, but the people came forward voluntarily to form their own ward vigilance committees and patrolled the unlighted streets of Jhansi at night. It was a remarkable testimony to the people's loyalty and faith in the Ranee that during these days of uncertainty no serious crime took place, although there were many bad characters who had obtained their undeserved freedom from the state prison.

The citizen conference was a memorable occasion. It gave the Ranee an opportunity to test the people's reactions to the revolution and to learn at first-hand their views on public affairs. For her people it was a new experience to be thus directly addressed and consulted by their sovereign.

In a brief speech[1] she said, 'With great difficulty we were able to save the city from being looted by the uncontrolled sepoys. They have now gone away, and I hope, for good. But they have left behind chaos and disorder which we must put right without delay. At any rate we must see that the citizens of Jhansi are not harassed and molested by anybody. I am most anxious to see that anarchy does not raise its head as the aftermath of the revolution

[1] Speeches in this book represent the sense, if not the exact language, as remembered by people who were present and repeated to Parasnis and other Indian historians. This quotation is from *Rani Lakshmibai* by Vrindavanlal Varma (in Hindi).

and it is for this reason that I have invited you all, my noblemen and representatives of the citizens, to give me the benefit of your experience and advice. Please speak your minds freely and frankly'.

The Ranee was warmly applauded, and the Indian secretary of the late Captain Gordon spoke next. He said that no time should be lost in informing the British Commissioner at Sagar that the Ranee had assumed control of the state on behalf of the British, and sending a detailed report on the conduct of the sepoys. He was supported by another Indian in the Company's employ.

The chief spokesman of the woodcarvers' community, Puran, did not like this suggestion. He said, 'The Company's control over Jhansi has come to an end. Why then ask the Commissioner once again to put his halter round our neck?' Puran's remarks startled the meeting and everyone began to whisper his approval to his neighbour. The two men in favour of reporting to the British frowned at Puran, but he ignored them and added, 'We do not want anybody else to rule over us. We want our own Ranee Sahib'. He received enthusiastic support from the representative of the oil-men's community, who said, 'We want to re-establish our own ancient kingdom and we will do it, come what may'. The milkman and shoemaker were more emphatic: 'We don't want foreign rule. Those who have a liking for it should make themselves scarce. We want our own Raj.'

Even the vested interests like the bankers and shopkeepers openly shared the popular feeling. One of them said, 'This is the day we were waiting for. It would be suicidal to return Jhansi to the British. We will have the Ranee Sahib's rule which is good enough for us'.

Lakshmibai's father, Moropant, summed up the discussion in a

statesmanlike manner. 'We will, of course, consider the valuable suggestion of Captain Gordon's secretary, but will decide, as is the consensus of the meeting, to empower Her Highness the Maharanee to administer the State as she thinks best and consider ourselves her loyal subjects.'

A large crowd was waiting outside the palace for the result of the conference and demanding to see Lakshmibai. Moropant went out and declared that the people's representatives had unanimously voted for the Ranee's rule and accordingly the Jhansi State would be once more independent.

The Ranee, wearing a white sari and a pearl necklace, appeared on the balcony of the palace. The people cheered and shouted, 'Long live Lakshmibai! Victory to Lakshmibai!'

In the streets, squares and gardens of the city men and women thronged to celebrate their newly found freedom. They hoisted the yellow Mahratta flag on their houses, held public feasts, and offered prayers in temples and mosques.

The glad news of freedom was greeted by a salute of guns.

Next day, the Ranee appointed her Government. Lakshman Rao became Prime Minister, Moropant Tambe Keeper of the Privy Purse, and Nana Bhopatkar Chief Justice. Jawahar Singh, with five subordinates, was put in command of the army and charged with organizing the armoury. Appointments were also made to the departments of police, revenue, religious donations, and others. To all her officials, Lakshmibai gave a simple instruction: 'Maintain order, punctuality, firmness, and vigilance, and do your duty.'

Under her leadership, 'work and more work' became the motto of the people. They worked with a will and with redoubled energy, though the atmosphere in the monsoon season

was sticky and hot. A new spirit of enthusiasm and self-help was in the air.

But Jhansi's strength could never compare on the battlefield with that of the British. The Ranee and her advisers set out to pursue their aims by using the weapons of diplomacy. In two letters, dated 12th and 14th June, she submitted to Major Erskine, the Commissioner at Sagar, this account of the recent events:

'The troops stationed at Jhansi through their faithlessness, cruelty and violence, killed all the European civil and military officers, the clerks and all their families; and the Ranee not being able to assist them for want of guns and soldiers, as she had only a hundred or fifty people guarding her house, she could render them no aid, which she very much regrets. . . . Since her dependence was entirely on the British authorities who met with such a misfortune, the sepoys, knowing her to be quite helpless, sent her messages . . . to the effect that if she at all hesitated to comply with their requests they would blow up her palace with guns. Taking into consideration her position, she was obliged to consent to all the requests made and put up with a great deal of annoyance, and had to pay large sums in property, as well as in cash, to save her life and honour.

'Knowing that no British officers had been spared in the whole district, she was, in consideration of the welfare and protection of the people and the District, induced to address orders to all the government subordinate Agencies, such as Police etc., to remain at their posts and perform their duties as usual. She is in continual fear for her own life and those of the inhabitants.

'It was proper that the report of all this should have been made immediately, but the disaffected allowed her no opportunity for

so doing. As they have this day proceeded towards Delhi she loses no time in writing.'

In her second letter she again expressed her sincere sorrow at the cruelties perpetrated by the rebels and added: 'It is quite beyond her power to make any arrangements for the safety of the district and the measure would require funds, which she does not possess, nor will the usurers in times like these lend her money. Up to the present time, after selling her own personal property and suffering much inconvenience, she has managed to save the town from being plundered and has kept up the form of the late government. She has recruited many people for the protection of the Town and Mofussil outpost, but without competent Government Force and funds she foresees the impossibility of holding on any further.'

Major Erskine replied on 2nd July and expressed his satisfaction at what the Ranee had done in the absence of British officers. He wrote: 'Until a new Superintendent arrives at Jhansi, I beg you will manage the District for the British Government, collecting the Revenue, raising such Police as may be necessary, and making other proper arrangements such as you know the Government will approve, and when the Superintendent takes charge from you, he will not only give you no trouble, but will repay you for all your losses and expenses, and deal liberally with you.'

The Commissioner also sent a Proclamation 'With my Seal and signature announcing that you will until further orders rule the district in the name of the British Government'. The Proclamation reads: 'Be it known to all people belonging to, or residing in the Government District of Jhansee, that owing to the bad conduct of the Soldiers some valuable lives have been lost, and property destroyed, but the strong and powerful British

Government is sending thousands of European Soldiers to places which have been disturbed, and early arrangements will be made to restore order in Jhansee.

'Until Officers and Troops reach Jhansee, the Ranee will rule in the name of the British Government and according to the Customs of the British Government, and I hereby call on all great and small, to obey the Ranee, and to pay the Government Revenue to her, for which they will receive credit.

'The British Army has retaken the city of Delhi and has killed thousands of the rebels, and will hang or shoot all the rebels wherever they may be found.'

Apart from the outright lie in the last paragraph, this proclamation was singularly lacking in grace. It contained not a word of appreciation of the Ranee's efforts to maintain law and order in the midst of chaos and anarchy. It told the people that the Ranee was a mere agent of the British and that they were to pay the Government revenue to her. As it happened (as we see from the Ranee's letter to the Political Agent, Governor-General for Central India, dated 1st January 1858) this proclamation never reached Jhansi and the people were spared the pain of having to listen to it.

It is difficult to judge whether Major Erskine had any inkling of the minds of the bureaucrats who were sitting in Fort William, Calcutta. But the reply he received to his communication of 2nd July showed that Lord Canning, the Governor-General, and his Council had prejudged the Ranee's part in the rebellion and massacre at Jhansi. Mr G. F. Edmonstone, Secretary to the Government of India, wrote on 23rd July: 'In respect to the Ranee I am to state that His Lordship in Council does not blame you for accepting in the circumstances in which you were placed her

account of her own proceedings, and sentiments, and entrusting to her the management of the Jhansi territory on behalf of the British Government, yet this circumstance will not protect her if her account should turn out to be false. From the account supplied to the Government by Major Ellis[1] it appears that the Ranee did lend assistance to the mutineers and rebels, and that she gave guns and men.'

Lakshmibai's contacts in Major Erskine's office told her of the correspondence between Sagar and Calcutta, which made plain to her what to expect from the British when they returned to Jhansi. Edmonstone's letter was proof positive, she saw, that they were bent on her destruction; they had accepted Major Ellis's report on Jhansi and had prejudged the issue without waiting to hear her side of the case. There was nothing for the Ranee to do but to fight for her honour. She did not care if the British called her a rebel but she could not allow them to regard her as a murderess. She told her ministers her final resolve in the sacred words of Lord Krishna: 'If you are killed on the battlefield doing your duty you attain *moksha* (deliverance) and if you win victory you enjoy the earth.'

The words 'I will not give up my Jhansi' that she had spoken

[1] Major Ellis's telegraphic message of 26th June merely states facts as they occurred at Jhansi. It should be noted that he does not incriminate the Ranee in the massacre. He says: 'The Mutineers at last having forced the Ranee to assist them with Guns and Elephants succeeded in effecting an entrance at two of the gates; they promised the Gentlemen that, if they laid down their Arms and gave themselves up quietly, their lives should be saved. The Gentlemen unfortunately trusted to their word and came out; they were tied to a long line between some trees, and after a short consultation had their heads struck off. The Sowars, it appears, bore the principal part in all these atrocities. This took place in the afternoon of the 8th.'

to Major Ellis when the annexation was announced came to her mind with renewed force. Lakshmibai now exerted herself simultaneously on three fronts: (1) to consolidate her position in the Jhansi State by strengthening internal order and warding off external dangers; (2) to establish firm contacts with centres of national discontent in order to join hands with them at the opportune moment; and (3) to prepare herself to face the struggle by organizing an army.

The task before the Ranee was not a light one, nor was she an experienced general and administrator. Some of her immediate advisers were devoted men but few of them had her vision, energy and determination. The main burden of formulating policies and forging the means to carry them out lay on the Ranee's shoulders. It was she who conceived new ideas, inspired the people with ideals of patriotism, and ultimately led them in battle against the foreign tyranny.

Lakshmibai was a devout Hindu and observed all religious festivals and holy days with meticulous care. She stopped the slaughter of cows in Jhansi, handed over the revenue of the two villages to the trustees of the Lakshmi temple, and liberally entertained learned Brahmins and holy men.

Yet in handling the administration and army she was the most unorthodox ruler India had ever seen. No distinction was made on the ground of class, caste or creed and she appointed men to offices irrespective of their being Moslem or Hindu. She gave them her entire confidence and they returned her trust with their undivided loyalty and affection. The chief of her artillery, who won unqualified praise from the British both for his devotion to duty and for the deadly accuracy of his fire, was a Moslem named Khuda Buksh.

In a short time she built new public offices, minted her own money, established law courts, and encouraged arts and literature. No touring company of players ever left Jhansi without receiving generous recognition from Lakshmibai. The state Library was her special interest. Her predecessors had always been great patrons of learning, and had sent their own scribes to Benares, Nasik, Kumbhakonam, Poona and other places of learning to copy books and manuscripts and bring them to Jhansi. The Ranee kept up this tradition and spent large sums of money on acquiring new books on religion, philosophy and cognate subjects. Unfortunately nothing remains of this splendid library to-day. In the British bombardment of Jhansi a shell exploded on the building.

Lakshmibai lost no time in restoring the traditional splendour of the court. The palace, built in spacious grounds, was a four-storey building with eight rectangular courts. The rooms were furnished in Indian style with costly Persian and Afghan carpets. The Ranee's audience hall contained Rajput miniatures and portraits of Mahratta warriors; the floor was covered with a rich red carpet on which were laid rows of square mattresses spread with white silk. Guests sat on these, supported by bolsters and cushions.

The Ranee herself sat on a raised seat behind a curtain, attended by female servants. On occasion she discarded the curtain and sat in the open court to transact state business. She had a keen eye and did not fail to notice the absence of any of the usual visitors; next time they came, she would always ask the reason for it.

After the midday meal she usually had a rest and attended the office from three o'clock in the afternoon till six in the evening. Her official dress consisted of jodphurs, a blue silk blouse and a

cap around which was bound a loose silk turban. In her cummer-bund she carried a short sword studded with rubies. The only ornaments she wore were a pearl necklace, diamond bangles and a large diamond ring on the small finger. Hers was an open court, and anybody who had a grievance could walk in and present his case.

Lakshmibai decided civil and criminal cases on the spot. If a problem required more expert advice she would ask the parties involved to come again and in the meantime consult the Hindu or Moslem priests, according to the religion of the disputants, and give her judgement accordingly. On special occasions she would write her orders and decisions in her own hand, but usually she gave them orally to be taken down by two clerks.

The Ranee was very regular and methodical in her personal life; she was a great believer in physical fitness and spent an hour or two every day in practising Indian clubs, wrestling and riding. Many stories were told of her uncanny knowledge of horses. One day an Arab dealer went to the Ranee with two superb steeds and offered them for sale. Lakshmibai tried both and said to the dealer that she would pay 1,000 rupees for one and 50 rupees for the other. The people around her were puzzled, for the animals looked equally beautiful and spirited. The Ranee explained that the one for which she had offered a small sum was weak in the chest and useless for any work involving sustained effort. The Arab admitted the fault and agreed to sell the animals at her price.

An immediate danger had to be overcome before Lakshmibai could pursue her work in peace. Sadasheo Rao, finding his claim to the Jhansi throne ignored by the rebels, collected a few thousand men and captured the Kurrara fort. Then he issued a proclamation saying: 'Maharaja Sadasheo Rao Narayan has

seated himself on the throne of Jhansi' and called upon the people to pay homage to him and ignore the Ranee. He soon discovered, however, that it was an unstable seat, for Lakshmibai sent a body of troops against him and routed his men in a single encounter. He fled to Gwalior and organized another attack on Jhansi. This time the Ranee's troops captured the impostor and he was held in the fort as a state prisoner.

No sooner was Sadasheo Rao dealt with than the two neighbouring princes of Datia and Pihari came forward to wrest Jhansi from Lakshmibai. They fared no better. The Ranee's troops inflicted a crushing defeat on their combined armies, who hastened back to their respective territories in utter confusion.

These disturbances were followed by a more formidable attack by the Ranee of Orcha, named Larhi Bai (the warrior queen), who sent a large army under Nathay Khan, a capable general but a bad politician.

Before starting on his aggressive mission the Khan informed Lakshmibai of his readiness to assign her the same amount of pension as the British Government had sanctioned, provided she surrendered the fort of Jhansi immediately. The offer was treated with contempt by the proud Ranee who sent him a defiant letter saying, 'Do your worst. I will make you a woman'.

This unexpected and unprovoked aggression by Larhi Bai proved a challenge and an opportunity for the people of Jhansi to make good their loyal determination to fight for the Ranee. Diwan Jawahar Singh, Diwan Dilip Singh, Diwan Raghunath Singh, Diwan Dhiraj Singh, Rao Anirudhha Singh, Rao Ramachandra, and other Bundela noblemen, summoned by the Ranee to defend the city, hastened to her help with their militia and horse. In a few days Jhansi became a vast camp of military leaders

and their men, all eagerly waiting to join battle with the enemy.

When the news came that Nathay Khan's army was approaching the city the Ranee assembled her noblemen and with an eye for the spectacular rode in front of the militia taking their salute. Suddenly she stopped, called Diwan Jawahar Singh, and tied his wrists with an orange silk string, the traditional sign of her entrusting the nobleman with the command of the army and charging him to win victory. To be so honoured on the eve of battle and in the presence of his peers and men was a mark of the Ranee's faith in his capacity as a soldier and a commander. Diwan Jawahar Singh placed his sword at the Ranee's feet to show his allegiance to her. She picked it up and returned it to him ceremoniously. The men and officers loudly cheered, the drums rumbled and the trumpets blew to salute their new military leader.

The Ranee, well aware of the great strength of the enemy, did not waste her men needlessly by opposing him at the first opportunity. She wanted the Khan to come into the range of her guns before attacking him and so she allowed him to reach the southern gate without opposition. The ruse succeeded; Nathay Khan's men, elated at the prospect of an easy victory, rushed forward to enter the city. Then the Ranee's gunner, Ghulam Goushkan, opened fire from the high turret. The invaders could not stand the fire, gave up their attack and fell back. Thereupon their commander decided to invest the city and bombard the fort. Taking advantage of night-fall he moved four of his guns to the Orcha Gate and ordered a mass attack on the Jhansi forces from all sides.

He kept the Orcha Gate under constant fire, and at one time its defenders almost gave way. The Ranee hurried to the scene and offered gold and silver to her men to encourage them to hold

on until fresh help arrived. Then she ordered Khuda Buksh, her redoubtable Chief of Artillery, to fire his big Bertha, 'Kadak Bijli'. The enemy's guns were soon silenced and captured by the Ranee. Nathay Khan lost the battle and his men fled in disorder. Commander Jawahar Singh sallied forth and joined forces with Raghunath Singh who was waiting in the nearby jungle. Together they inflicted a crushing defeat on the retreating enemy.

Larhi Bai sued for peace. Lakshmibai behaved generously to her sister queen and on a payment of war damages agreed to drop the quarrel. She also sent a report to Sir George Hamilton, the British Political Agent, about the affair, but her messenger was intercepted and killed by Nathay Khan, who was smarting under his defeat at the hands of a woman. He took his revenge by representing to Hamilton that he was fighting for the British and Lakshmibai was in league with the rebels. No one would suggest that the Khan's mischief was the decisive factor in tipping the scales in Calcutta, but undoubtedly it added to the accumulating prejudice against her.

This victory over Nathay Khan proved a great morale-booster to the people of Jhansi. They were now assured of their own strength and of the Ranee's capacity to lead them in war. Most of them had believed in her ability from the first, but there were a few who had had their doubts because she was so young and inexperienced. Nathay Khan's defeat silenced the critics and raised her in the estimation and love of her people as never before. Now, all doubts dispelled, they were ready to go wherever she led them.

The people commemorated the victory with great *eclat*. They held a special thanksgiving *puja* (service) in the temple of Lakshmi and gave a traditional free meal to the poor and destitute. The

Ranee held a grand *durbar* to celebrate the occasion and to honour the men who had distinguished themselves in the action.

With her own hand the Ranee put the saffron mark on the forehead of her fighting noblemen and presented them with valuable gifts. There were rewards in cash for the soldiers and pensions to the families of those who had been killed. Lakshmibai's generosity to her men became proverbial as time went on.

CHAPTER 10

Preparing for the inevitable

From August 1857, when Larhi Bai's attack was repelled, until January 1858 Jhansi was at peace. Not far away, hard-fought battles between the rebels and the British succeeded one another; and it may be asked why Lakshmibai did not send some of her well-organized forces to the aid of those with whom her sympathies lay, or why her failure to do so does not diminish her stature in Indian eyes as the heroine of the war for independence.

These questions suppose the India of 1857 to be something other than what it was—to be, in fact, an oppressed nation-state struggling for freedom under a single leadership, like Italy in the age of the Risorgimento. Tactically, it is certainly true that the lack of co-ordination among the rebels, contrasting with the planned and centrally directed British military effort, was the chief cause of the defeat of the former. But this is only to say that Britain was a nation and India was not—was not, in 1857, even a nation in subjection. Even before the British conquest, the sub-continent had not been ruled by a single authority, still less united in emotional loyalty to one such power. The rule of many princes, great and small, owning nominal allegiance perhaps to a remote overlord but resenting any close control, represented the Indian past and, at this date, still the Indian ideal. The restoration of the Mogul Emperor gave a spur of sentiment to the rebellion; but states like Jhansi had fought for centuries against direct rule from Delhi and would have fought against it again, if need be, had rule from Calcutta been overthrown. The reality was that

Jhansi in 1857 had achieved its war aim, and to this view of the matter the rebels elsewhere would have readily assented. To Lakshmibai, her duty to Jhansi and her duty to India alike urged her to administer her state as best she could and secure for her people as long a space of security and tranquillity as possible; and she would not have commanded their loyalty if she had thought otherwise.

Meanwhile, it was as inevitable as anything can be in history that the British should gain the upper hand; and this they did in the course of the autumn. On 22nd September, after six days of intense fighting, John Nicholson's force from the Punjab recaptured Delhi. The Emperor became a prisoner and his sons were shot after surrendering and putting their trust in British honour. This deprived the rebellion of a centre, in so far as it ever had one. In Oudh and along the Ganges defeat came gradually but with increasing certainty. General Havelock broke Nana Saheb's army in the battle of Cawnpore on 16th July and reoccupied the city. A month later he won another victory at Bithur. Advancing slowly through country where every hand was raised against his small column of 2,000 men, he relieved the defenders of Lucknow on 26th September, only to be himself besieged there. However, the fall of Delhi released forces from the Punjab for the campaign in Oudh, and they reached the Residency, the British stronghold at Lucknow, on 16th November. Havelock's troops, those of Nicholson, and others from Calcutta, including reinforcements from home, were now united and able to dominate the northern plains. Nevertheless, the old city of Lucknow and much of the countryside were still in rebel hands, and the reconquest was not completed until 10,000 Gurkhas arrived from Nepal to help the British in March 1858.

Though the Indian resistance in Oudh was hard to break, and though the embers of revolt, to use a favourite British metaphor of the period, had to be stamped out one by one, yet some while before the New Year Sir Colin Campbell, the new British commander-in-chief, could feel reasonably satisfied with progress there and could turn his attention to Central India. The importance of this region was well understood by British strategists. The author of *Memorials of Service in India*, for example, described Gwalior as 'one link of a chain, which could not have given way in any part without ruining our power in India.' If Sindhia (the hereditary title of the ruler of Gwalior) had joined the rebellion, he continued, 'the revolt would almost certainly have been national and general instead of being local and mainly military; and instead of its fate being decided by those operations in the easily traversable Gangetic valley, upon which public attention was concentrated, we should have had to face the warlike races of Upper India combined against us, in a most difficult country, and in all probability those of the South also. Had Sindhia then struck against us—nay, had he even done his best in our behalf, but failed—the character of the rebellion might have been changed almost beyond the scope of speculation.'

Sindhia did not strike against the British; and by the time he 'failed', all was nearly over. Jhansi, however, was almost as pivotal, and under the leadership of the Ranee—the woman whom the British called 'the best man on the rebel side'—it was a glowing ember that might at any moment shoot out sparks to cause a general blaze. To destroy her was, in Campbell's clear-headed estimation, a necessity. With Delhi recaptured and the issue decided in Oudh, it was his main task.

Lakshmibai knew that the assault was coming, and made all

possible preparation for it; but she decided also on one last attempt to avert it. On New Year's Day she sent a *kharitta*, or official letter, to Sir Robert Hamilton, who had just returned from home leave to resume his duties as Political Agent for Central India. It appears that her advisers were not unanimous in counselling this renewed effort to convince the British that the Ranee wanted peace. Some of them, including her father, were already convinced of the futility of this course. Lakshmibai, however, drew up the letter with her usual diplomatic skill—and with her usual dignity, for it gave no hint of fear. It was a straightforward narrative of the events since June, with another expression of her horror at the massacre, and of the difficulties and dangers she had met. With it she sent copies of her earlier letters to the Governor-General, to Major Ellis, and to other officials. Her account of the fate of this correspondence effectively conveys the atmosphere of uncertainty that prevailed. She says: '. . . I lost no time in writing to the British officers . . . and gave them detailed information as to the state of the country; some of the bearers of these letters are missing; others being plundered before reaching their destination came back to Jhansi; those that were sent to Agra returning, stated that they succeeded in sending the letters within the Fort of Agra through a water carrier, but that their life being not safe they did not wait for a reply. Major Ellis informed me that my letters were referred to the Officer that was acting for Captain Skene. I got a letter from the Commissioner through the Chief of Goorsaray dated 23rd June, stating that I should take charge of the District. Another communication from the same Officer dated 10th July in reply to my three letters was also received; it referred me to his former communications in which a proclamation putting me in charge of the District was

said to have been enclosed. On the 29th July, I wrote back in reply stating that I had not received the proclamation.'

In the concluding paragraph she complains against the Commissioner at Jubbulpore who 'seems not prepared to move for my help as he states in his letter dated 9th November, that the services of the British troops for the present are required at his quarter'.

Sir Robert did not acknowledge receipt of this letter, but forwarded it to the Government of India and received the following reply from the Secretary: 'I am directed to inform that you have acted rightly in not replying to the Ranee's *Kharitta*. I am at the same time desired to request that you will give your attention to the collection of evidence regarding the conduct of the Ranee of Jhansi at the time of the mutiny and massacre there and during the months which have since elapsed.'

Sir Robert Hamilton's attitude was a sure indication of what she could expect if she were to surrender without a fight. To use Lord Clive's words, 'To go forward was dangerous, but to go back was impossible'. She had only one course open—to fight to the finish.

Accordingly, the Ranee used her time to prepare for the defence of Jhansi. Unlike some other leaders of the revolt, she did not under-estimate the strength and character of the enemy and made provision for every emergency. A fire-brigade was mustered in anticipation of bombardment and large stores of food and fodder were built up to meet a prolonged siege. She also ordered the manufacture of munitions and gunpowder to be stepped up and with her engineers and gunners went round to inspect the city walls and the Fort every day.

When the British annexed Jhansi, they destroyed or rendered useless most of the guns in the Fort. Some were rusting on the

THE RANEE
(courtesy the Victoria and Albert Museum)

LAKSHMIBAI'S HUSBAND MAHARAJA GANGADHAR RAO AND HIS SARDAR
(from a contemporary court painting)

ramparts; others were buried under rubbish. Khudabuksh was ordered to unearth them and see if any could be made usable. Those he could do nothing with were melted down and new guns cast. Two factories were started for making rifles, pistols, lances, and swords, and two others for ammunition and gunpowder.

When war became imminent, the Ranee called for men to enlist in her army. The response was enthusiastic. From a population of 220,000, a force of 14,000 was raised, all of them volunteers. They included 1,500 sepoys trained in the Company's Army. Recruits were put on daily platoon exercises, and the Ranee attended in person to watch them drill.

Her special care was the training of the women who enlisted as troopers and gunners. There had only been one other instance in Indian history of female warriors—two battalions, each 1,000 strong, raised by the Nizam of Hyderabad for his war with the Mahrattas in 1795. They seem to have performed French military drill quite correctly, and to have behaved at the battle of Khurda no worse than the rest of the Nizam's forces (which was not very well). The amazons of Jhansi, however, gave a good account of themselves when war came to the town. They fought side by side with the men, took on watch duties, carried ammunition to the guns, relieved gunners, and cared for the wounded—all under the fierce and unceasing fire of the enemy. So truly national was the *levée en masse* that Vrindalal Varma, a native of Jhansi and an authority on the period, says that practically every woman was taught to ride, shoot, and fence.

The Ranee's keen eye did not miss a certain amount of restiveness in the civil population of the city. Some of the more wealthy people had begun to send their families and gold to Gwalior for

safety as the Maharaja and his minister, Dinkar Rao Rajwade, had proved themselves staunch in their fidelity to the British, and consequently no trouble was expected there. The Ranee did not stop anybody from going away, but she did not want their example to be followed by all as it would mean a panicky exodus from the city. She therefore decided to hold the annual ceremony of Haladi-Kunku with more than the usual splendour.

This is a ceremony in honour of the Goddess Lakshmi and therefore a Friday—traditionally regarded as auspicious and allotted to the deity—was chosen for this occasion. In the great Durbar Hall in the Royal Palace the image of the Goddess, bedecked with burnished gold ornaments and diamond head-dress, was placed high on a raised platform decorated with lilies, marigolds, roses, chameli, and champak. The floor of the hall was covered with rich and colourful carpets and the walls were hung with tapestries and paintings of great antiquity. On the two sides of the Goddess were arranged in descending order fruit and vegetables from the Ranee's farms and trays of sweets and silver ware. In another part of the hall were arranged the brass model birds and china of local manufacture. This ceremony is only for women and the Ranee invited almost every woman in the city. No caste or class distinction was observed and ladies of high ranking officials and Sardars mingled with the wives and daughters of shopkeepers and workmen.

From two o'clock in the afternoon till nine o'clock at night the ceremony went on. Dressed in their lovely silk saris and wearing jewellery of gold, pearls and diamonds, the ladies thronged the palace, while the Ranee, wearing a snow white sari, moved among them. She had sensed the coming danger and thought this was perhaps the last time she could meet her people.

The Haladi-Kunku gathering was a great success and helped to boost the morale of the people. The women on returning home talked eloquently to their menfolk of the wonderful generosity and kindness of their ruler and her determination to uphold the dignity and independence of the Jhansi Raj.

CHAPTER II

The British advance

A separate command was created for the campaign against Jhansi, which was not launched from the main war zone but from the secure and peaceful base of Bombay. The man in charge was Major-General Sir Hugh Rose. He was an elderly officer who had never served in India, but these apparent drawbacks proved to be advantages. Rose, an outstanding commander by any standard, approached his task with a fresh mind and made light of conditions, notably of climate, which had been accepted as formidable obstacles. Moreover, age and experience had produced in him, instead of the excessive caution of many Indian Army generals, the confidence to be bold. Unorthodox both in personality and in his methods, he was a picturesque character who rode horses, elephants, and camels with equal ease.

Hugh Rose, born in Berlin in 1801, had behind him thirty-seven years of service when he arrived in India in September 1857. Entering the Army in 1820 he quickly rose in his profession, obtaining his majority in recognition of his services in Ireland during the Ribbon and Tithe disturbances. At a later period he was sent to Malta to command the 92nd Highlanders where he again distinguished himself as a military leader. In 1841 he served in Syria with Omar Pasha against Mehmet Ali and the Egyptian Army. On one occasion during a reconnaissance near Ascalon he led a regiment of Arab Cavalry, successfully routed the Egyptian advance guard, and thus saved Omar Pasha from a surprise which might have entailed heavy loss. For this he

received a sword of honour from the Pasha and was made a Companion of the Bath. Soon after this he was appointed Consul-General in Syria, where again he made himself conspicuous by saving the lives of 700 Christians whom he brought to Beirut, lending his own horse to the women while he himself went on foot.

In 1851 Rose was appointed Secretary of the Embassy at Constantinople. Two years later, when acting as Chargé d'Affaires in the absence of the Ambassador, he completely outwitted the intrigues of the Russian Envoy, Prince Menschikoff.

On the outbreak of the war with Russia in 1854, Rose was appointed Queen's Commissioner at the Headquarters of the French Army, with the rank of Brigadier-General. During the campaign he was repeatedly thanked by the French Commanders and was recommended by Marshal Canrobert for the Victoria Cross, for conspicuous gallantry on three occasions during the siege of Sebastopol. He had distinguished himself both at Alma and at Inkerman.

This proven campaigner was matched against a woman of thirty without any experience of modern warfare. But that was not the only disparity between Jhansi and its enemies. Rose's army, though numerically about equal to the Ranee's, was greatly superior in equipment, supplies, and fire-power. It consisted of two brigades, each containing both British and Indian troops. Altogether there were two British infantry battalions and one cavalry regiment; four Indian infantry battalions and four cavalry regiments; numerous artillery pieces of varying calibre, sappers and miners, and a siege train. This impressive array was at all events a convincing tribute to Lakshmibai.

Rose landed at Bombay on 19th September 1857, and set to

work at once on making his plans and studying the terrain where he was to fight. On 6th December he reached Indore, his advanced base, and took over command of his force, hitherto styled the Malwa Army but now renamed the Central India Field Force. As brigade commanders he appointed Brigadier Stuart of the 14th Light Dragoons and Brigadier Stewart of the Bombay Army.

Sir Hugh rested his troops for a while. The country about Indore was particularly suited for this purpose; there was an abundance of the necessities of life, no lack of good water or fodder for cattle, and a pleasant climate.

Early in January 1858 he opened his campaign, capturing Sehore and Rahatghur. The latter was a stronghold with considerable fortifications and was stoutly defended by Rohila and Afghan soldiers. The British Army had to bombard the Fort for four days and their fire was answered vigorously; but on the following day it was found that the place was deserted, except for a few corpses. How the besieged got away was a mystery. An eye-witness account says, 'The most amazing thing was to see the place from whence they had escaped. To look down the precipitous path made one giddy—and yet down this place, where no possible footing could be seen, they had all gone—men and women—in the dead of the night'.[1]

The General pushed on and at Baroda defeated the Rajah of Banpur, a follower of the Ranee. On 3rd February he reached Sagar and captured it without opposition. With Sagar in his hands he had achieved his immediate objective, namely, to open the roads to and from the West and North. Now he set himself to clear the way to the East and captured the Fort of Garhakota which was a formidable obstacle on his way to Jhansi.

[1] Dr Thomas Lowe: *Central India.*

Sir Colin Campbell's Chief of Staff had written on 24th January 1858: 'Sir Colin will be glad to learn if Jhansi is to be fairly tackled during your present campaign. To us it is all important. Until it takes place, Sir Colin's rear will always be inconvenienced, and he will be constantly obliged to look back over his shoulder as when he relieved Lucknow. The stiff neck this gives to the Commander-in-Chief and the increased difficulty of his operations in consequence you will understand.'

But it was no easy task. Sir Hugh Rose took nearly six weeks to cover the 125 miles from Sagar to Jhansi, winning a number of minor victories before reaching Jhansi on 20th March. But for his dominating personality and forceful leadership, the British would not have succeeded in cutting their way through dense forests and difficult mountain passes which created awkward problems of transport and supplies. These problems were made doubly difficult by the complete lack of co-operation from the inhabitants of this region. Nowhere in India had the people displayed such intense hostility to the English as in Bundelkhand, at the heart of which lies Jhansi. Indeed, the Bundelas feel proud even to this day for the determined resistance they put up and the way they defended their territory inch by inch.

At Sagar Rose finalized his arrangements for his march on Jhansi. There was much to be done before the two Brigades could again take the field, but everything was achieved in an incredibly short time.

Anticipating scarcity of provisions, he ordered large supplies from Bhopal and other places. All who could get boots laid in a stock, and the messes provided themselves with all kinds of European commodities such as beer, soda water, and wines. 'The Parsee shopkeepers at Sagar proved most invaluable friends to us;

although they charged us exorbitantly then, as the future proved, they were most moderate when compared with other merchants further north', writes Dr Thomas Lowe, who accompanied Sir Hugh Rose.

The season was becoming hotter every day, and the districts through which the British Army was about to march promised to afford little or nothing in the way of commissariat, as almost all of them were in the hands of the rebels and disaffected chiefs. The General foresaw this, and took care to provide for his force accordingly. Sheep, goats, oxen, grain and flour, and large supplies of tea and soda water for the sick and wounded were collected with all possible speed. A military train was established from Bombay, which was to follow and aid Rose's Army in various ways.

The siege train was re-supplied from the arsenal with a large amount of ammunition and strengthened by the addition of other heavy guns, howitzers, and large mortars. Many more elephants were obtained and the ordnance and engineering parks were especially strengthened. The Third European Regiment changed their highly unsuitable uniform for one especially adapted to the season and country, and they now dressed in a loose stone-coloured cotton blouse and trousers, with headgear of the same colour. Thus they could stand exposure with comparative comfort, while at the distance of half a mile they were almost invisible.

The Raja of Banpur, the Nawab of Banda, the Raja of Shahgurh, and many Bundela chiefs came forward to obstruct the onward march of Sir Hugh's army by occupying the passes in the mountainous ridges which separate Bundelkhand from Sagar. Rose had the choice of three passes: Narut, Mundanpur and Dhamoni. He ordered his First Brigade to march by the

trunk road towards Jhansi, and by this turning movement to clear his left flank, while he himself took the direct route. On the way he heard heavy firing on his left. This was the First Brigade taking the fort of Chanderi on 17th March. The enemy here offered desperate resistance, but the fort was carried by storm.

The pass of Narut was by far the most difficult of the three; and the rebels, thinking that Sir Hugh must move through it, increased its natural difficulties by barricading the road with *abattis* and boulders. The Raja of Banpur supervised the defence. The next most difficult pass was Dhamoni. Very little was known about Mundanpur, the third pass, which was about twenty miles from that of Narut; but a reconnaissance induced Sir Hugh to select this as the point of attack. Although the least formidable of the three passes, it was still difficult. It was defended by the rebel sepoys of the 58th Native Infantry, as well as by a large number of picked Bundelas.

In order to deceive the enemy and to prevent the Raja of Banpur from coming to the assistance of the Raja of Shahgurh, who defended Mandanpur, Sir Hugh ordered a feint to be made against Narut, whilst he himself attacked Mundanpur. He even marched some miles towards Narut with his whole force; and then counter-marching, fell unexpectedly on Mundanpur. Just as he came into action the Raja of Shahgurh opened heavy fire on the battery. This brought matters to a speedy conclusion for it was now necessary to make a rapid advance. The fire was extremely hot, 'as rapid and hot a fire as ever I saw', wrote Sir Hugh to Sir Colin Campbell. At one point it became so heavy and dangerous that Sir Hugh ordered his gunners to retire to avoid the Raja's fire. Before this could be done, however, the Indians stepped up their fire to intense ferocity and the British

artillerymen had to take shelter behind their own guns. There were numerous casualties and the General had his horse shot. He himself narrowly escaped death. But his Hyderabad contingent dashed down the valley, completely routed the enemy, and saved the day. Driven out of their positions, the rebels endeavoured to join another large body of their comrades who occupied the hills on the left of the road. Once more Rose was too quick for them. Before they could get there, he ordered the heights to be stormed under cover from two guns, and the enemy was driven from all the hills commanding the pass, one after another. They retreated through the jungle to the fort of Sarai, and were pursued for a considerable way.

Lakshmibai had sent an appeal for help to her old friends Tatya Tope and Rao Saheb, who were not far from her borders with large forces. Tatya responded to such effect that he almost disrupted the British plans. He marched unexpectedly toward Kalpi and made a sudden attack on the Rajas of Panna and Charkhari, both staunch allies of the British. This put Lord Canning, the Governor-General, in a political dilemma. Not to go to the help of his allies would be regarded by other princes as an act of weakness and faithlessness, and might encourage them to rise against the British. In Canning's eyes, the political dangers of Tatya's adroit move outweighed the military disadvantages of diverting Sir Hugh's advance. He ordered General Whitlock to hasten to the relief of Charkhari and directed Sir Hugh to co-operate in this task. 'It is the Governor-General's wish', wrote Canning's secretary to Sir Robert Hamilton, 'that this objective should for the present be considered paramount to the operations before Jhansi, and that Sir Hugh Rose should take such steps as may most effectually contribute to its accomplishment.'

Rose and Hamilton[1] did not agree, and they decided to inform Canning that it was impossible to conform with his wishes until Jhansi was dealt with.

'To relieve Charkhari', wrote Sir Robert (13th March 1858) 'by this force would involve refusing Jhansi and the suspension of the plans of operations towards Kalpi; both of which operations formed the groundwork of Sir Hugh Rose's instructions. However anxious, therefore, the desire to aid the Rajah of Charkhari, Sir Hugh Rose is compelled to consider the movement of his forces, or of any part of them, in the direction of Charkhari at present impossible. The advance of this force on Jhansi, in the opinion of Sir Hugh Rose, is calculated to draw the rebels to assist in its defence; while the fall of this fortress and its possession by us will break up the confederacy, take away its rallying point, and destroy the power and influence of the Ranee, whose name is prominently used to incite rebellion.'

Following up this letter, Sir Hugh Rose wrote himself on 19th March. He expressed himself as most happy to obey the Governor-General's instructions at a fitting time, for they complemented a plan of operations which he and Sir Robert had on the previous day agreed it would be advantageous to carry out 'after the reduction of Jhansi'. Rose also informed General Whitlock of his intention to attack Jhansi at once and to co-operate with him afterwards.

While this correspondence was going on, Tatya succeeded in exacting 300,000 rupees from the Raja of Charkhari and capturing

[1] Sir Robert Hamilton's Headquarters would normally be Gwalior. At the commencement of the Malwa campaign, however, he was attached to the camp of General Sir Hugh Rose and therefore moved with the latter as the campaign developed.

twenty-four guns. From there he marched to Kalpi where he encamped for the time being with the intention of harassing the British as they advanced on Jhansi. Unfortunately, however, he made no further move until Sir Hugh reached Jhansi and invested the city. Tatya Tope had a superb capacity for intrigue and organization; indeed he had in him the makings of a great quartermaster-general. But he lacked the essential military qualities of daring and initiative.

General Rose, unmolested by Tatya, reached Jhansi at about seven o'clock in the morning of 20th March and immediately began to reconnoitre and invest the city. The decisive battle was now joined.

CHAPTER 12

Hope and disappointment

Rose's next action was in the sphere of what is nowadays called psychological warfare. He issued a proclamation warning all civilians to keep away from Jhansi because it would soon be captured. On the approach march, every inhabited place which the British had been obliged to fight for had been punished by wholesale looting and a massacre of the people; Jhansi, if it did not surrender, must expect as much.

Lakshmibai had no illusions as to the fate she would meet if she were taken alive, but she thought it right to give her subjects the choice of trying to save their lives and homes. She called another representative meeting, and asked those present to say frankly whether they wished to defend the city or to sue for peace. Her Ministers urged the latter course. The Ranee, though everyone knew that she was for fighting, put herself in the hands of her people and pledged herself to accept their decision.

The leaders of the sepoys who had taken service in the Jhansi Army voted for war. They were backed by the Bundela chiefs; then the representatives of the citizens vowed to uphold the standard of independent Jhansi. Thus the popular enthusiasm and the sepoys' determination won the day.

The Ranee thanked the people for taking 'a brave and noble decision'. She said, 'We fight for independence. In the words of Lord Krishna, we will enjoy our freedom if we are victorious; if defeated and slain on the battle field we will earn eternal glory and salvation'.

It must be said to the credit of Lakshmibai's counsellors like Nana Bhopatkar that although they had advised her to come to terms with the enemy they loyally stood by her when the final decision to fight was taken. Indeed, most of them died defending her cause.

The Ranee prepared swiftly for battle, building new gun-sites, strengthening the old ones, encouraging the ammunition workers, supervising the troops' parades, inspecting the stores and magazines, holding meetings of commanders and discussing the latest reports of the enemy movements. With untiring energy and uncommon resourcefulness this young woman set about defending Jhansi against a foe superior in every respect.

Vishnu Godse writes: 'Lakshmibai decided to defend Jhansi and immediately took up the work of repairing and strengthening the city walls. She enlisted in her army as many men as volunteered to join and placed them in position. The bastions and turrets were now manned day and night; big guns were ready to fire at a moment's notice. Lalu Bakshi (a seasoned gunner and expert in explosives) was put in charge of munition manufacture, with the responsibility of hastening output. Hundreds of tons of rice and grain were roasted and stored for ready distribution to the poor. Large quantities of flour, ghee and sugar and other eatables were stocked for the troops and citizens. All available silver was sent to the royal mint to be melted down and turned into currency. The priests and holy men offered prayers and invoked victory for Lakshmibai's armies; special messengers were sent to Rao Saheb and Tatya Tope asking them for their help. In this way, the brave woman, undaunted by the coming storm and with great calmness and forethought, went about organising the defence of the city.'

Godse also records an incident which has not been mentioned by Sir Hugh's biographers or other writers on the Jhansi campaign. He says: 'A rider came to the city gates and delivered a letter addressed to the Ranee. It was taken to her by the Prime Minister and soon the whole council was summoned to consider a reply. The letter said, that Lakshmibai should go and meet the captain, accompanied by her Prime Minister, Lakshmanrao, Lalu Bakshi, Moropant Tambe and five other ministers who were mentioned by name. No one else must accompany the Ranee, nor must she have an armed escort. She must meet the captain within two days and not later.'

As the decision to defend Jhansi was already taken only the wording of a reply had to be discussed. After some deliberation a letter was written to this effect: 'The communication under reply does not give any reason for the meeting nor does it contain an assurance of safe-conduct. However, according to the usual custom of the Jhansi Raj, the Prime Minister, accompanied by an armed escort, may call on you. Of course, being a woman the Ranee cannot come. Please yourself.' The royal seal was put on the letter and it was sent by the same messenger who had brought the British message.[1]

It is difficult to know what authority the writer of the British note had to send it to the Ranee; Kaye, Malleson and Pinkney, whose writings are regarded as source material for this period, make no reference to it. (Godse calls it a letter from the *captain*—apparently he was not conversant with the ranks in the British Army. The editor of Godse's book suggests in a footnote that the author meant Sir Hugh Rose.)

If Godse's 'captain' was none other than Sir Hugh, then surely

[1] Vishnu Godse, *My Travels* (Marathi) p. 65.

this seasoned diplomat-soldier had not understood the true character of the Ranee nor the depth of her resolution to fight to the finish. She was not a silly woman to walk into Rose's snare with all her cabinet and without arms or military escort. She rightly suspected treachery and danger in the suggested meeting and refused to go.[1]

Around the city, the Ranee had taken care to leave no shelter for the enemy. There was not a tree to give shade to the troops, who had to remain out in the open till the General returned in the evening from his reconnaissance.

The fortress of Jhansi stood on a high rock, overlooking a wide plain. With its numerous outworks of masonry, it presented a very imposing appearance. The walls of granite, from sixteen to twenty feet thick, were protected by extensive and elaborate works of the same solid construction, all within the walls, with front and flanking embrasures for artillery fire, and loopholes, some ranged in five tiers, for musketry. Guns placed on the high towers of the fort commanded the country all around. One tower, called the 'White Turret', had been raised in height by the Ranee recently and was equipped with heavy ordnance for the defence.

The fort was surrounded by the city on all sides, except on the west and part of the south faces. The precipitous steepness of the rock protected the west side of the fort. To the south, the city wall, with bastions springing from the centre, ended in a high mound, to which Rose gave the name of the Mamelon. Flanking fire from this position protected the south face of the fort. The Mamelon was fortified by a strong circular bastion for five guns, round part of which was a ditch, twelve feet deep and fifteen feet

[1] Ibid, p. 105.

broad, of solid masonry. The city itself, four-and-a-half miles in circumference, was surrounded by a massive wall, from six to twelve feet thick, and from eighteen to thirty feet in height, with numerous flanking bastions, armed as batteries, and with loop-holes in the banquette for infantry. Outside the wall to the east were a picturesque lake and the palace of the Ranee. On the south side of the wall, and outside it, were the ruined cantonments and residences of the English officials and troops, burnt by the rebels. There were also, on this side, temples and gardens.

After a long and careful reconnaissance Sir Hugh had decided to make his assault upon the city from two directions, from the east and from the south. On a rocky knoll on the eastern side of the city, and about 300 yards from the city wall, he placed four batteries.

While these were being put into position, Sir Hugh tried to effect a more complete investment of the city with the cavalry of the First Brigade, which had joined him on the night of 21st March. The remainder of the First Brigade arrived on the 24th, and was posted to the south of the city. When all the forces were assembled, Rose decided on a two-pronged attack. The troops belonging to the Second Brigade on the eastern side of the city were to lead the 'Right Attack', while those of the First Brigade on the south were to carry out the 'Left Attack'.

When Sir Hugh was satisfied with the necessary preparations for his grand operation, the siege of Jhansi commenced in full earnest. Early in the morning of 25th March his guns began to bombard the city. The gunners kept up an unceasing fire from the east but the General's main target was the Mamelon. He had discovered some weakness in its defences, although the Ranee's men had endeavoured to strengthen it to the utmost. With this

knowledge Sir Hugh concentrated his fire on it, reinforcing his batteries with 18-pounders.

But the Mamelon was a hard nut to crack. The Ranee's gunners answered back shot for shot. For five days from the 25th to the 29th the British guns pounded day and night against this formidable mound but with little effect. On the last day its parapet and bastion were slightly damaged and the Ranee's guns were temporarily silenced. But the women of Jhansi came forward to repair the damage and overnight the Mamelon was made ready to give battle to the British batteries. The cannonading on both sides became increasingly intense. The British observers admit that the fire from the besieged became so incessant and fierce that the city wall and the ramparts of the fortress looked like one sheet of flame. One of the Ranee's guns was popularly known as '*Ghana Garjana*' or Roaring Cloud. It wrought grave havoc in the enemy ranks. Dr Thomas Lowe writes about this gun: 'One of their guns, which we named 'Whistling Dick', never gave us time for this precaution (bobbing one's head beneath the sandbags) for the puff of smoke was scarcely seen before the shot whizzed over your head, or came with a heavy thud against the battery.'

On the following day, 30th March, a small breach in the city's wall was effected, but the besieged garrison promptly stockaded it. 'We had silenced several of their guns and as often as they were silenced so often did they re-open from them to our astonishment.'[1]

On the evening of 31st March, the lookouts on the turrets of the Fort sighted the Peshwa's great army, commanded by Tatya Tope, marching towards Jhansi. Eagerly they carried the good

[1] Dr Thomas Lowe: *Central India* p. 242.

news to their ruler, who hastened to the palace terrace to see for herself the welcome sight of a relieving force coming to her help. Her father, Moropant, and Prime Minister, Lakshmanrao, expressed their relief at the approach of Tatya's force, as it was they who had sent him special word to lose no time in coming to relieve the city.

The people of Jhansi saw at sunset an immense bonfire which Tatya had lit on a hill on the Jhansi side of the River Betwa as a signal of his arrival. The Ranee answered it by firing salvos from all the batteries of the fort and city. To the besieged there was no doubt that their deliverance was at hand.

Tatya had every reason to feel confident of victory. His force was numerically stronger than Sir Hugh's, and contained the redoubtable Gwalior Contingent, which had destroyed the British force under General Wyndham near Cawnpore, and also another brigade which had recently defeated the Raja of Charkhari and captured twenty-four guns.

Lakshmibai had prayed for Tatya's arrival, but Rose too had anticipated it. Tatya had halted, as the General knew, at Kalpi; whenever he decided to move on Jhansi he would have to come from the north-east. Rose had established, therefore, a telegraph post on one of the hills, east of Jhansi, which commanded an extensive view of the country, north and east. On the evening of 31st March it put up flags indicating that 'the enemy were coming in great force from the north'. Sir Hugh was at the time in the battery on the right, whither his aide-de-camp rode to give him the news.

Although not unexpected, this was the most critical development in the war. It presented a threat that the besieging army would be caught and destroyed between two wings of the enemy.

A less determined and resourceful man than Rose might have thrown in the sponge. But he surveyed the situation coolly and decided to meet the enemy with 1,500 men. It was a gamble; but it was the only way.

Sir Hugh ordered the First Brigade to strike camp and move off the Kalpi road on the Jhansi side of the telegraph hill. In the darkness his elephants brought two 24-pounders which he placed on the Orcha road near the hill to check Tatya's men making for the city.

While he was quietly moving his men, Sir Hugh did not relax the investment of the city. On the contrary, he ordered the shelling and siege operations to go on from both right and left with the same fury and determination all through the night.

Next day the small British force routed Tatya's formidable army in a single encounter. When Tatya attacked, Sir Hugh boldly threw his infantry against the enemy's centre while his horse artillery and cavalry attacked on the flanks. In Sir Hugh's own words: 'The enemy poured a heavy fusillade into the cavalry; the Valaitis[1] jumped up in hundreds on high rocks and boulders to load and fire, but before they could reload their matchlocks, Captain Need, leading his troop in advance, penetrated into the midst of them, and for a time was so hotly engaged that his uniform was cut to pieces, although, singular to say, he only received a slight wound himself. The attack on the enemy's right by the fire of Captain Lightfoot's battery and the charge of the 14th Light Dragoons were equally successful; and the enemy broke and retired in confusion.'

Tatya Tope's loss in this extraordinary action was 1,500 men, besides stores, siege guns, camp equipment and materials of war.

[1] Afghan warriors on the rebel side.

He and most of his army, however, managed to retire to Kalpi.

As Lowe recorded with legitimate pride, 'the 1st of April had passed away gloriously with the well-fought "Battle of the Betwa"; few instances in the annals of Indian history can be brought forward to eclipse the military genius of the general who planned and carried out so perfectly the defeat of such a foe, or the valour of the handful of the brave troops who fought under him that day.'[1]

Tope's defeat is the most ignominious episode in the 1857 Revolt. Not even the most patriotic and partisan interpreters of Indian history, like V. D. Savarkar, have been able to give any satisfactory reason for it. Savarkar has tried to blame the men for their lack of courage. He calls them 'traitors' and 'cowards', but this charge cannot be sustained. When they were defeated and pursued by General Rose, the British eye-witness account acknowledges with appreciation that 'not a man asked for quarter'.

Then again, the Peshwa's army numbered 20,000 men and possessed heavy guns, engineering obstacles, all the material of war and plenty of ready cash. No one, therefore, can argue in extenuation of the defeat that the rebel forces were ill-equipped or inadequately served. Their ignoble defeat can only be ascribed to Tatya Tope's faulty tactics, primitive generalship, and lack of effective leadership. His conduct in most of the actions before and after the Betwa battle suggests that he believed in defensive tactics and he never risked a frontal attack on the enemy. He could create, almost overnight, new combinations of men and circumstances and force his enemy to overcome them; but he could not lead his men to a daring assault. His forte was skilful retreat, and

[1] Dr Thomas Lowe: *Central India* p. 251.

he imagined that victory could be won by fighting rear-guard actions alone!

His intervention had no other result but to demoralize the besieged people of Jhansi. His advance had raised high hopes in them; they could not think that such a vast army as he commanded could be routed by a handful of Rose's men. As soon as the roaring of the cannon told of the onset of the Betwa battle the Ranee's guns opened a demonic fire on the British batteries. Her men mounted the bastions and the wall, shouted and yelled, and poured down volleys of musketry. They stepped up their fire to such an intensity that all the towers of the fort were enveloped in flames and smoke, and the British thought that the besieged garrison was about to make a sortie and attack them. That they were expecting an attack from the Ranee's men is evident from Dr Sylvester's remark that he found it impossible to imagine why 'the garrison did not make a sortie, and destroy our batteries, while the Peshwa's army was attempting their rescue from without'.

When this question later cropped up in the discussion between the Ranee and Tatya Tope the former is reported to have said that she was misled by a traitor named Laltabada. This was perhaps the first of the treacherous plots in her camp which, as we shall see, helped Sir Hugh to victory. In any case, before a sortie could be made, the Ranee saw the pitiable plight of Tatya's men who were running away from the field. It was a humiliating and depressing sight. Enthusiasm turned to bitterness, and the citizens' shouts were abruptly silenced.

CHAPTER 13

The fall of Jhansi

Lakshmibai would have been less than human if the disastrous defeat of her ally had left her unmoved. But she was not the woman to give way to despair. The danger of defeat only spurred her to greater exertions. She put on her helmet, unsheathed her sword, and assembled her officers. Her words restored their flagging spirits and inspired them with confidence. 'For the last ten days', she said, 'Jhansi has been putting up a heroic fight without the Peshwa's help. We have seen what has happened to that army. But it does not matter. As long as we do not lose heart we can go on fighting whether we get help or not. You have fought all this time with matchless courage and unflinching determination. You have endured much and suffered more. By the superb exhibition of these noble qualities you have earned lasting fame and glory. Now we are reaching the final battle, and I rely on you to maintain the very highest standard of heroism and discipline you have hitherto established by defending your beloved Jhansi to the last man. I know you will do it.'

Everyone present vowed again to fight to the end. The Ranee distributed circlets of gold, cash, and robes of honour to her gallant officers and men, and sent them to their posts with renewed courage and resolution. Lakshmibai knew her men and they had implicit faith in her leadership, her intrepidity, and her fighting genius.

The chief gunner, Ghulam Ghoushkhan, rearranged his guns and batteries and directed a deadly fire on the enemy. Khuda

Buksh, now in charge of the infantry, distributed his men behind the city ramparts and ordered continuous musketry fire through the flanking bastions, loopholes and the banquette.

The Ranee, riding a white charger, went from point to point and supervised the defence. Whatever the hour she was seen directing her men, looking after their wants, nursing the wounded and feeding the hungry. Indeed, the British called her the 'ubiquitous queen'.

Yet the odds were lengthening. Before the battle of the Betwa the British, it was believed, had been running short of ammunition. The guns and munitions captured from Tatya Tope amply replenished their arsenal. Encouraged by his victory, Rose gave his men no rest. He ordered the city to be stormed on the morning of 3rd April.

Ten days of unceasing fire from 18- and 24-pounder siege guns had done considerable damage to the defences. Most of the towers on the south face of the Fort were useless, and the works on the city walls had taken a heavy battering. The bombardment was more intense than ever on the night before the assault, and this led to a curious incident. Just before midnight the Ranee received a report from her spies that the British had used up most of their ammunition and were preparing to strike camp the next day. She seems to have believed this, and took a few hours' rest. The report was probably spread by the British to deceive her.

Godse's eye-witness account gives a good picture of how the besieged, inspired by the Ranee, stood up to their ordeal. He writes:

'The British gunners did their damnedest that night (2nd April). Their red-hot balls came over the city and fort like rains in the autumn. No one could get a wink of sleep.

'The Ranee girded her sword and went personally to supervise the counter-fire. She rewarded the gunners handsomely and they reopened the silenced guns. Now the English concentrated their heavy fire on the royal palace and one shell fell right on top of the special apartment reserved for the Ganesh festival. It was a spacious hall beautifully furnished with Lucknow glass, chandeliers and precious works of art. The shell shattered all the glass which made a strangely sweet sound as it broke and fell in heaps. The shrapnel killed four people and severely wounded nine.

'That day the enemy never stopped pouring fire on us. Hundreds of shells fell on the palace roof but did not do much damage. The masonry work withstood the attack admirably. The heavy shells, some of them about twenty pounds in weight, would make a superficial dent on the terrace but nothing more. It is remarkable that although the palace walls looked like a sieve there was hardly a crack in them.

'When the fire became too intense I joined the sixty-four men and women who were taking shelter in a comparatively safe room on the lower floor of the palace. There was hardly any standing room there and the atmosphere became oppressive with heat and perspiration. It became difficult to breathe as still more men and women began to push themselves in.

'Just then the Ranee's gunners, mocking at death as it were, reopened their fire and killed the men behind the British guns. Their aiming for the enemy target must have proved deadly accurate as Sir Hugh's guns soon stopped shelling the palace and we could come out and breathe again freely.'

The assault troops moved up under cover of darkness. The attack was to be made by escalade, but near the Mamelon, which had weakened under constant bombardment, there was also a

breach in the walls. Even so, the attack might not have succeeded as soon as it did without the help of a traitor. His name, according to Parasnis, was Dulaji Thakur. He was a Bundela sardar and was in charge of the guns defending the Orcha Gate on the south wall. He showed the British the weakest spot in the defence of the city and the points where they could escalade the wall. Furthermore, he stopped his guns at the appointed signal from the British of a red flag to enable the storming party to climb the rampart easily. In recognition of his services Dulaji received a gift of two villages from the British!

The assault parties left their tents dead on time at 3 a.m. but the signal to start the operation was delayed for some unknown reason—perhaps to wait for Dulaji—and the men anxiously watched the approach of dawn. At length the word to advance was given and they crept forward with the ladders hoisted upon the shoulders of the sappers, preceded by the 3rd Europeans and Hyderabad Infantry as a covering party with their swords and bayonets glistening in the pale moonlight.

The defenders, however, were alert, and as soon as Sir Hugh's men turned into the road leading towards the gate the bugles sounded and fierce gunfire opened upon them from the whole line of the wall, and from the towers of the fort. For a time it appeared like a sheet of fire, out of which burst a storm of bullets, round-shot and rockets. 'We had 200 yards to march through this fiendish fire', writes Dr Lowe, who accompanied the party, 'and we did it, and the sappers planted the ladders against the wall in three places for the stormers to ascend.' But the fire of the Ranee's guns grew stronger and amid a hail of bullets, shells, stink-pots, infernal machines, huge stones, blocks of wood and trees—all hurled upon their heads—the attackers were forced to stop and

take cover. Inside the city bugles were sounding and tom-toms beating madly, while the cannon and the musket were booming and rattling and carrying death fast into the attacking parties. At this moment three of the ladders broke under the weight of men and a bugle sounded for the Europeans to retire. A brief pause and the stormers rushed to the ladders again, led by the engineer officers. Lieut. Dick of the Bombay Engineers was at the top fighting bravely and calling on the 3rd Europeans to follow him; Lieut. Meiklejohn, also of the Bombay Engineers, had gained the summit of another ladder and boldly leaped over the wall into the midst of the enemy; Lieut. Bonus, B.E., was upon another. The defenders hurled down Lieut. Dick from the wall, bayoneted and shot dead; Lieut. Bonus was also thrown down, struck by a log of wood in the face, and Lieut. Fox of the Madras Sappers was shot through the neck. But the British soldiers pushed on. From eight ladders, they at last gained a footing upon the ramparts, and could fight on level terms with the Ranee's men, who stoutly contested every point of the attack.

Simultaneously the other party had carried the breach, and the two were able to join hands inside the city. Lakshmibai was now on the scene. She had been awakened with the news that her guns on the south wall were silent and that the enemy had forced an entry. Careless of the shellfire, she seized her binoculars and ran to the terrace of her palace. She saw hundreds of men approaching the wall, carrying large bundles of grass on their heads. Behind them came white soldiers. As soon as the grass-carriers reached the wall, they threw their loads on the ground and against the wall so as to make a flight of steps for the soldiers to climb up and jump on the rampart. A few of her men ran away but others stood firm and offered resistance. But the defenders at this point

were few in number and the enemy cut them to pieces. In ten or twelve minutes hundreds of British soldiers were seen jumping on the south wall.

For the first time in the war the Ranee showed signs of losing her nerve and she collapsed, pale and speechless. But she was soon herself again. Leading her 1,500 devoted Arab and Afghan regulars, she dashed to the south wall and attacked the British. In no time it became a hand-to-hand fight; sword clashed against sword and men rolled down in the dust. The Ranee was in the thick of the fight and killed many of the enemy herself. The counter-attack was so unexpected and furious that the British ran. They took cover behind houses and fired with their revolvers. Their losses, in fact, were by now serious. One account says: 'The wounded and dead who fell beneath the walls were very numerous. Col. Turnbull was shot through the abdomen from a window in the palace. The blood welled out from his wound and the surgeon could do little for him. Then there were many others along the ramparts lying wounded, and near these was found the body of Lieut. Meiklejohn cut to pieces. Death was flying from house to house with mercurial speed. . . . Before long the houses on both sides of the street leading to the palace were set on fire.'

It was to the palace and to Jhansi Fort that the Ranee now had to retreat. She had checked the attackers, but she had not dislodged them. They were avoiding a direct fight and had taken to shooting from a safe distance. Lakshmibai was reluctant to leave the field. She wanted to hunt out the enemy and challenge him to fight. A seventy-five-year-old chief saw the danger and urged her to return to the fort. Holding her hand, he said, 'Maharaj, all the city gates are thrown open and hundreds of whites are inside. They are shooting from behind the houses. To

be killed by their bullets is as useless as dying an ignoble death. There is no sense in trying to fight here when you can't see the enemy. Take my advice and return to the fort and do whatever God wills you to do.'

The Ranee found it difficult to accept this advice, but with a heavy heart she called back her troops and returned to the fort to continue the struggle.

It is interesting to note that no British authority has referred to this short but brilliant engagement. It did not prevent the ultimate victory, but it certainly throws fresh light on the character of Lakshmibai, who proved her reckless courage every time it was called for—a rare quality among contemporary Indian leaders in whose company it was her misfortune to fight India's first war of independence.

John Henry Sylvester, assistant surgeon under Sir Hugh, does not make a direct reference to this episode but his narrative of the resistance the British met on their entry into the city closely follows Godse's account. He says that the stormers ran down the incline to the street leading to the palace which ran close under the fort walls. 'The matchlock and musketry fire on the men at this point was perfectly hellish! The bullets fell so thickly in the dusty road that they resembled the effect of hailstones falling in water when striking it, and the men fell thick and fast here. One point of the street ran quite close to the gateway of the fort and was not passed without severe loss. Here it was that most of our men fell.'

Back in the palace, Lakshmibai flung herself on a couch, crying bitterly, not for what would happen to her but for what was happening in the city. Halwaipura, the most wealthy part of Jhansi, was set on fire by the British soldiers and hundreds of men,

women and children were being burnt to death. Their heart-rending shrieks and cries could be heard in the fort. Thousands of cows, bullocks, horses, camels, donkeys and dogs were running amok.

The Ranee, unable to bear any longer the misery of her people, called to those in the palace and declared, 'I have made up my mind not to surrender but to blow myself up with gunpowder. Those of you who want to follow and die with me may remain here, but others should leave the fort as soon as it becomes dark and go to the city and make the best of it!'

There was a silence; then the old chief who had persuaded her to return to the palace rose and went to her. Again holding her hand, he led her to an adjoining hall and made her sit down, saying:

'You must calm yourself. The city is suffering because of God's will. It is the law of Karma; you can do nothing. To commit suicide is a great sin. Man suffers in this life according to his deeds in the previous existence. Why then should one add to the store of sin by committing greater sins like suicide? We must be prepared to suffer unflinchingly all the trials of our worldly life. You are a brave woman. You must not think even for a moment of ending your life by committing suicide!

'Let us prepare tonight to get out of the city—if necessary we will fight the enemy to break his cordon and join the Peshwa at Kalpi.

'If we meet with death in the attempt, it's a thousand times better to die in the field and win a place in heaven than to die a coward's death by suicide. You have done everything possible; there is nothing for you to grieve about. We will prepare to break through at night, and in the meantime you must retire and have a bath and a meal.'

He spoke with such dignity and authority that his words commanded respect, and the young woman felt immensely relieved to find somebody who could guide her with sage advice. To show her gratitude she touched his feet as a daughter would her father's on receiving his blessings.

By now the defenders of Jhansi were split into small groups, fighting determined but hopeless rearguard actions. The British stormed one stronghold after another, and ultimately fought their way into the palace. Street-fighting went on for the whole of two days, 3rd and 4th April. On the second day the Ranee's gunpowder factories were stormed and blown up.

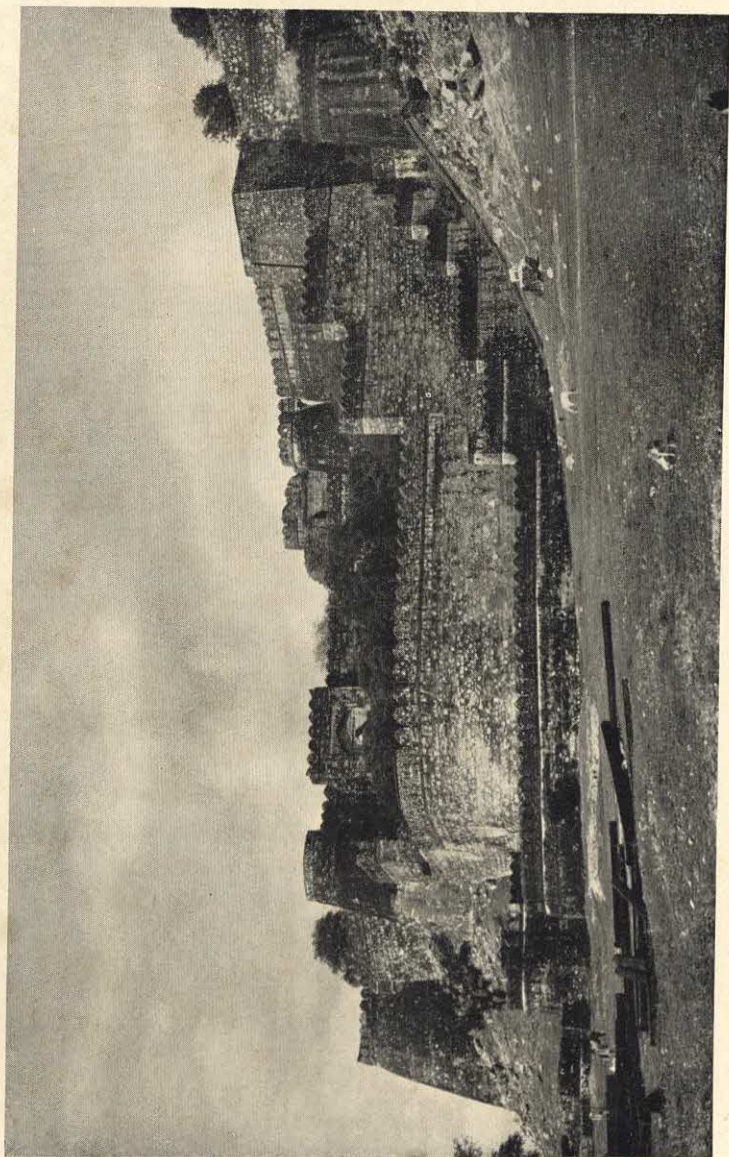
The men of Jhansi were now literally defending their homes. Those who could not escape threw their women and babies down wells and then jumped down themselves. Rose's men dragged them out, however, and after the women and children had been separated, the men were put to death. The citizens of Jhansi fought to the death like tigers and 'so the bayoneting went on till after sunset'.

About 400 of the Jhansi soldiers escaped from the west face of the town and gained a hill. They were surrounded by Rose's cavalry and many of them were killed, but they refused to give up. Twenty of them gained a height which was difficult of approach and continued fighting. They shot dead Lieut. Parke and many others and inflicted heavy casualties on their enemies. Then they retreated to the top of the hill and blew themselves up.

To the west side of the palace about 1,500 men collected in a place called the New Pettah and put up the most determined resistance to the British. They fought hard, contesting every inch of ground, until the cavalry killed some 300. The rest moved beneath the fort and joined its defenders.

The Ranee's faithful followers defended her palace to the end, and the enemy had to pay dearly for it. Forty of her personal bodyguard fought to the last man in the royal stables; it is said that they tried to strike back even as they lay dying on the ground. This episode is described in a graphic account of the taking of the palace:

'When I got into the palace I found it crowded with our soldiery, some lying down worn out with the heat and hard work, some sauntering about with two and three pagrees upon their heads and others round their waists, some lying down groaning from their wounds or the explosion, and others busily engaged extinguishing the flames in the rooms where the explosion had taken place. The whole place was a scene of quick ruin and confusion; windows, doors, boxes, and furniture went to wreck like lightning. The jewels had been found and these, too, would soon have disappeared had they not been secured. The officers and men needed rest during the mid-day heat, for there was yet enough to be done ere Jhansi was captured. We had been some two hours in the palace when it was discovered that a large body of the enemy had shut themselves up in the stables. The 86th and 3rd Europeans rushed in upon them and slew every man—upwards of fifty—but not before they had cut down some dozen Europeans. The wounded men came staggering out with the most terrible sword cuts I ever saw in my life.'

But the Ranee was far from her palace when the invaders stormed it on 4th April. She said farewell to the members of her household on the previous evening, having called them together and distributed generous gifts of money and clothes. Many of them were reluctant to leave her and begged to share her fate. But Lakshmibai would not listen to their pleas and sent them

JHANSI FORT

BHANDERI GATE OF JHANSI FORT FROM WHICH
THE RANEE ESCAPED TO KALPEE

down to the town, telling them to save their lives as best they could.

At midnight the Ranee, wearing armour and carrying a dagger and two loaded revolvers in her cummerbund, left the Fort on her white horse. She was accompanied by hand-picked troops and by some of her family, including Moropant, her father, all riding fully armed beside her. Among the soldiers were the Afghans who had returned with her to the fort after their engagement in the morning. Each carried as much cash as he could and an elephant was loaded with bags of gold, jewels and other valuables.

The Ranee did not carry any money—the only valuable thing she had was a silver drinking-cup. Damodar was fastened to her back with a silken shawl, as, holding the reins in one hand and a sword in the other, she rode off. Her departure was no clandestine escape. As the party came down the fort and left the city by the north gate, hundreds of Lakshmibai's subjects stood on both sides of the street to bid her farewell.

A contemporary account says: 'Hardly had Lakshmibai got out of the city when the enemy's pickets were roused and gave the alarm. Immediately the escaping party was attacked and a gun fight developed. The Ranee used her revolver skilfully while her horse galloped swiftly on.

'In this skirmish many men were killed, but many more lost their way and ran in different directions; the pickets and cavalrymen got mixed up and the Ranee took full advantage of the situation and rode out of the enemy line. She was followed by her personal woman servant and one or two bodyguards. As soon as they were clear of Rose's scouts they took the road to Kalpi. Cavalrymen tried to pursue the Ranee but soon gave up the chase

as her horses were swifter than theirs. In the morning the British found many dead bodies but they were disappointed to find their chief prize gone.'

British writers have always marvelled at this audacious feat. It seemed impossible to succeed in evading detection by the pickets. How extraordinary the achievement was will be better appreciated when it is understood that the fort gate was on the side towards the palace and inside the city wall and that a considerable distance had to be covered by the escaping party before they reached the wall gate—the Ganpat Khirki—through which they left the city. But that was not all. Having got outside the city wall, they had still to face the cordon of Rose's scouts which encircled the entire city and its suburbs. One explanation for the Ranee's success is that she separated her men into small parties and sought simultaneously to break through the cordon at various points so that the scouts, although able to turn many back, could not prevent them all from escaping. It is also said that when the Ranee was challenged by one of the pickets, she told him that her party was going to the aid of the Princess of Tehri, who was threatened by the Ranee's men! Satisfied with this reply, he allowed her to proceed. Whatever the explanation of the escape, General Rose was furious at the loss of the Ranee, whom he had hoped to capture alive. He ordered Lieut. Dowker to pursue her, but the chase proved hopeless. 'The Ranee, though seen in full flight, mounted on a grey horse and attended by only a few followers, could not be overtaken.'

Here is Lieut. Dowker's own story (as he told it to Col. R. G. Burton): 'I was gaining fast on the Ranee, who with four attendants was escaping on a grey horse, when I was dismounted by a severe wound and would have been almost cut in half but

that the blow was turned by the revolver on my hip. I was thus obliged to give up the pursuit and the lady escaped for the time being.'[1] Dowker does not say whether it was the Ranee's sword which disabled and dismounted him. Indian authorities are unanimous in saying that the Lieutenant engaged the Ranee in sword fight at Bhander, a small village where she had stopped for food. She was about to leave the table when Dowker and his party appeared on the scene and immediately attacked her. But she proved too quick for him; with one powerful stroke of her sword she disabled him so severely that he was thrown off his horse, reeling in the dust. He would have been cut to pieces but for the timely help of one of his cavalrymen. While Dowker was being assisted by his men the Ranee with her attendants made off. She reached Rao Saheb Peshwa's headquarters at Kalpi before midnight.

It was a remarkable feat for a woman to have covered a distance of 102 miles in twenty-four hours on horseback, through rough and rocky country, and to have engaged in desperate fights on the way.

[1] *The United Service Magazine*, Vol. *LIV*. New Series (Oct. 1918—March 1919).

CHAPTER 14

A city's agony

The battle for Jhansi was over by the evening of 4th April, but the sufferings of the people were only beginning. British historians have thrown a discreet veil over the tragic story of the next three days, using such phrases as: 'No less than 5,000 persons are stated to have perished at Jhansi,' or 'The estimated number of killed was 4,000.' The impression given is of deaths in the heat of battle, inevitable in any war. No attempt is made to say how many of the killed were soldiers and how many civilians, or how many perished after the battle was over.

Sir Hugh Rose himself gave the lead in this conspiracy of silence, or rather of distortion. In his dispatch he writes: 'Neither the desperate resistance of the rebels nor the recollection of the wholesale murders perpetrated the preceding year at that place could make them forget that, in an English soldier's eyes, the women and children are always spared. So far from hurting, the troops were seen sharing their rations with them.'

This Christian theme is enthusiastically taken up by his Assistant Surgeon, John Henry Sylvester, who faithfully echoes his master's voice. He writes: 'During the whole siege the greatest forbearance was shown to all who would peacefully surrender, and yet the estimated number of killed was 4,000: in fact, there was an amount of forbearance and Christian kindness displayed by the Europeans to unfortunate women and children, and to aged men, that reflected more credit on their already lustrous arms, and would not have been exhibited by any other European

nation under the circumstances which caused the appearance of a British force before the walls of Jhansi. It is no fiction when it is said the soldier shared his meals with some of the people found destitute in the city.'

The good doctor's picture of the aftermath of battle is so idyllic that one wonders if he meant it to be taken seriously. 'So soon as the fighting ceased,' he wrote, 'officers and men began to look about them with that spirit of curiosity which pervades one when visiting the shops in Wardour Street; they dived into every house and searched its dark corners—not to *loot*, of course, because that was forbidden under the strictest punishment.'

This diving and searching might have been greeted with raised eyebrows in Wardour Street. Sylvester's colleague, Dr Lowe, expressed himself more cautiously. 'Considering the temptation,' he wrote of the British soldiers, 'one must say that they were more than obedient to the order to keep their hands from picking and stealing.'

It must be asked, nevertheless, why Indian troops were ordered to accompany their British comrades about the city. Was it not because the latter were notoriously wanting in respect for native women—to say nothing of native property? And why did the rebel sepoys, as contemporary accounts tell us, kill their wives and even children lest they should fall into the hands of the British? Even civilians did the same thing, and such a desperate action surely suggests that they had reason to fear for the safety and honour of their womenfolk, a matter of supreme importance in Indian eyes.

It may well be true, and redounds to the credit of the men concerned, that some of the soldiers shared their rations with

destitute people and treated the women and children with respect and kindness. But most of the victorious army was otherwise engaged. If we are to believe Indian accounts, Jhansi was systematically pillaged and subjected to a reign of terror, so prolonged and so thorough that it could only have been ordered, or knowingly permitted, by the General for the purpose of teaching the rebel city a lesson.

Vishnu Godse's story is trustworthy for several reasons, not least because it was written purely for the instruction of his own family and not published till fifty years after the events he described. He was a priest and had neither the capacity nor the inclination for joining the revolt. He left Vasai, his native village near Bombay, for a tour in Northern India and to earn money by reciting the sacred Vedas. The revolt broke out when he was on his way to Jhansi, where he found in Lakshmibai a liberal patron of his learning; she asked him to stay and perform her religious ceremonies and festival worship. Then came the siege and the struggle. When the Ranee left the fort on the night of 3rd April, he came down to the city with many other non-combatants to save his life. He wrote down what he actually saw and experienced in the first days of the British occupation of Jhansi. He writes without bitterness and anger. In one place he philosophises and says that as one who had gone through trials and tribulations such as these, it would be natural to blame and curse the English. But what was the use of it? After all, were not the people punished by God for their sins, in all countries and through history? Maybe it was His will that Jhansi should be purged of its sins by taking the punishment it received from the occupying power.

'4th April', wrote Godse, 'was the massacre (*bijan*) day and

everyone thought that he was standing on the edge of a graveyard.

'The first thing I asked my kind host, Mandavgane, was how we were going to evade the massacring party. He assured me that in a building opposite his house were big built-in nitches (*bandas*) where one could hide safely. They were dark and not a breath of fresh air could be had, but we must go into them if we valued our lives.

'I offered my evening prayers, ate a meal and went upstairs to see the condition of the city. And what a sight I saw! It looked like a vast burning ground (burial place). Fires were blazing everywhere and although it was night I could see far enough. In the lanes and streets people were crying pitifully, hugging the corpses of their dear ones; others were wandering, searching for food while the cattle were running, mad with thirst. All the houses in Halvaipura were on fire, their flames reaching the skies, and as no one was attempting to put them out other houses were catching fire too. I became sick and my head began to go round and round. That night I could not get a wink of sleep. The fear of being killed kept me awake.'

Early in the morning Godse offered prayers, and had just stepped out of the house to cross the street when he heard gunshots fired very near the house. He and his friends were very frightened and almost lost their lives but somehow they reached the hiding place. They found that all the *bandas* were already occupied, but they managed to squeeze themselves in one of them where they remained hidden for the rest of the day without food and water.

'No sooner had we got into the *banda*,' writes Godse, 'than we heard hundreds of gunshots which meant that so many lives were being taken by the soldiers. How cruel and ruthless were

these white soldiers, I thought; they were killing people for crimes they had not committed.'

As the sun went down and the shooting parties retired to their camps the poor Brahmins came out of their hiding place and returned home, where they heard the sad tale of the Karkare women who lived next door. 'The old man of 60-65 years of age and his son were killed and the women were crying all day with the bodies in front of them. They requested us to help them and perform the last rites and cremate the bodies. We were all hungry and it was getting late but we performed the cremation ceremony in the courtyard and then brought the women with us and passed the night uneasily.

'Remembering the dreadful experience of the previous morning we decided to take our places in the shelter before the night was out. This was the third and final day of *bijan* and many more men were killed than in the two previous days.

'A Brahmin family who maintained a sacrificial fire were our neighbours. The head of the family had just finished his daily religious worship of the fire when two white soldiers accompanied by four Indian sepoys[1] forced an entry. The whites went straight into the room reserved for the sacred fire which was covered, according to the religious custom, with wicker work. The whites kicked the baskets and saw heaps of ashes under them. They suspected that the Brahmin had hidden his valuables in the ashes and so they put in their hands to pull them out. As to be expected, their hands were burnt and they were so infuriated they instantly killed the Brahmin, his brother and his son. In all they

[1] The sepoys took no part in the massacre. They were detailed to keep an eye on their white comrades and to stop them from raping Indian women.

killed eleven people in that house and took away whatever little gold and silver they could lay their hands on before they moved on to the next house.

'For this last day's work of butchery the English soldier brought to bear all his vigour, thoroughness and skill and exhibited to the full his primitive instincts. He was determined to see that nobody escaped his death-dealing attention. . . .

'Not only did the English soldiers kill those who happened to come in their way, but they broke into houses and hunted out people hidden in barns, rafters and obscure, dark corners. They explored the inmost recesses of temples and filled them with dead bodies of priests and worshippers. They took the greatest toll in the weavers' locality where they killed some women also. At the sight of white soldiers some people tried to hide in haystacks (in their courtyards) but the pitiless demons did not leave them alone there. They set the haystacks on fire and hundreds were burnt alive. . . .

'If anybody jumped into a well the European soldiers hauled him out and then killed him, or they would shoot him through the head as soon as he bobbed out of the water for breath. Many women who clung to their husbands in utter desperation fell by the bullet that killed their husbands.'

The British troops did not only kill, say Godse: theys simultaneously carried out a privileged type of looting. As members of the conquering race they were instructed not to touch the ordinary things but to take away anything in the way of precious stones, gold, silver, jewellery and currency. Jhansi was one of the richest cities in India and consequently the loot the European soldiers gathered there amounted to millions of pounds. They plundered the citizens' houses and belongings and 'ransacked the

whole palace and even the jewels on the idol of the Goddess Lakshmi'. They destroyed valuable palace furniture and works of art, kicking them about as though they were rubbish. But the worst act of vandalism, in the opinion of this learned Indian, was that they wrecked and despoiled the state library which had been built up for generations by successive rulers of Jhansi. Part of it was gutted by fire when a shell fell on it, but the rest of the collection would still have been saved had not the soldiers been attracted by the rich and beautiful cases and silk bindings in which the books and manuscripts were kept. They tore out the pages and threw them to the wind, and took away the cases!

Here are more extracts from Godse's account:

'When the killing was over the Madras Contingent was given permission to loot the people's utensils, such as pots and pans, water jugs, eating plates of brass and copper, in fact, anything which was made of metal. These Indian looters took away even hinges and bolts on doors and windows.

'The second day was allotted to the Indian Contingent of the Hyderabad Regiment. They took away clothing of every description. Whether it was of rich silk or cotton they just bundled it up and carried it away on elephants. They collected beds, mattresses, sheets, blankets, carpets—anything and everything that came from a weaver's loom or a tailor's shop. They found their biggest and richest haul in the wealthy merchants' houses and stores.

'On the third day came another Indian regiment and started collecting all variety of cereals—rice, wheat, maize, rye, lentils, etc. They had brought with them a team of bullocks and huge sacks which they filled with the contents of bins and jars in which the people had stored their food.

'By the time the fourth day arrived the people in the city were

completely denuded of anything and everything they possessed. And yet the fourth day was given as a time for general looting. Previously, as we have noted, the Indian soldiers could loot specified varieties of articles but on the last day they were given permission to take away anything they fancied, or could lay their hands on. They took away chairs, charpoys,[1] bedsteads and even the water-wheels and ropes with which the people drew water from the wells. Not a single useful thing was left with the people.

'The little store of provisions we had hidden underground by the gutter was all finished by the time the looting came to an end. We were all hungry, but, as there was nothing to eat, we drank plenty of cold water and went to sleep.'

When the massacring and looting were over a proclamation was issued which declared in the name of God that the country belonged to the Empress and the Government belonged to the English.

'Thousands of scavengers were employed to clear the streets and fire-fighting pumps were fetched to put out the still burning houses in the Halwaipura area.

'In the squares of the city the sepoys and soldiers collected hundreds of corpses in large heaps and covered them with wood, floorboards and anything that came handy and set them on fire. Now every square blazed with burning bodies and the city looked like one vast burning ground. By another order the people were given permission to take care of their dead, and those who could afford to give a ritual cremation took away the bodies of their relatives and friends, but the others were just thrown on the fire. It became difficult to breathe as the air stank with the odour of the burning human flesh and the stench of rotting animals in the

[1] Indian string beds.

streets. The carcases of thousands of bullocks, camels, elephants, horses, dogs, cats, donkeys, buffaloes and cows were strewn all over the city. These were collected and removed to the outskirts of the city where a huge pit was dug into which they were all pushed and the pit covered with earth.'

CHAPTER 15

Another defeat

It was Lakshmibai's boyhood friend, Rao Saheb, who had assumed the title of Peshwa on the outbreak of the rebellion and whose army was encamped at Kalpi. He knew that her slight frame concealed great physical stamina, as well as immense courage and endurance; but he and all about him were amazed when she rode into his camp just before midnight, having covered a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, with a boy of ten strapped to her back over the heavy armour, and in a temperature that rose to 120 in the shade.

Their meeting the next morning was an embarrassing one, at least for the Peshwa. It was largely because of the ignoble failure of his army that Lakshmibai had lost her capital and was a fugitive princess. Nor did she hide her feelings. As soon as the polite preliminaries were over she unsheathed her sword and placed it in front of the Peshwa, saying:

'Your Highness's illustrious forebears presented this weapon to us and with their powerful help we used it to do what was just and proper. But now that we cannot have your support I beg to return it to you!'

The Peshwa looked at the sword lying in front of him but he dared not meet the look of scorn in the Ranee's eyes.

He replied as best he could. 'Your action', he said, 'is proof enough that you are a worthy member of your illustrious family. For days you defended Jhansi valiantly and ably against the powerful English, and when it became necessary you made your

escape, undaunted by the enemy's cordon. This proves your military skill and courage. Our ideal of independence can only be attained under leaders who are brave soldiers of genius like yourself. I beg you to take back this sword and give me all your support in my struggle.'

The Ranee was very touched by these words and she took back the weapon, pledging herself to give him her wholehearted help. 'Nothing', she declared, 'will give me greater happiness than to die on the battlefield, serving the Mahratta standard. Give me men and I will go and fight the enemy!'

This was a natural request as she had no army of her own except a few faithful Afghan soldiers and cavalrymen who had followed her to Kalpi. The Rao's army then consisted of a number of regiments of the Gwalior State troops, several battalions of regular sepoys who formerly served in the British forces, the levies of the Nawab of Banpur, and several other rebel Rajas.

To honour the Ranee, Rao Saheb held a special parade of the troops. They stood, with the Mahratta standard hoisted beside them, as the infantry, cavalry and artillery marched past.

The Ranee could see, however, that the army which looked so impressive in numbers was half made up of camp followers who were more interested in looting than in fighting. She pointed this out to the Peshwa and advised him to dismiss those men who were a burden on his resources and who were likely to be more of a nuisance than a help when fighting the enemy. She also complained about the lack of discipline and order in the army and insisted on putting the men on daily military drill and exercises. Undoubtedly there was some good material among the men but unfortunately neither Rao Saheb nor Tatya Tope had bothered to train them properly.

The Peshwa accepted the Ranee's suggestions and directed Tope to carry them out. But Tope was never keen on putting the men through their paces, nor did he realize the value of discipline. He was popular among the men but it is doubtful if he commanded their respect.

Lakshmibai, however, continued to impress her ideas on the rebel leaders. Her exertions and the presence of the Jhansi soldiers had some effect on the rest of the commanders. They saw the Jhansi cavalrymen and soldiers in battle order, small in number but smartly dressed, doing their military drill and exercises every morning. Others began to follow the example, but the Peshwa army had to face the British before any effect was felt. It is said that if the Ranee had had a little more time the whole outlook and spirit of the rebel army would have changed.

The Ranee also pressed for an agreed strategy to carry on the war. She soon discovered, however, that a great psychological gulf separated her from the other leaders. Rao Saheb was haughty in his manner and prided himself on being the supreme commander; the Nawab of Banda was vainglorious, and Tatya Tope fancied himself as knowing all the secrets of military science.

Soon the rebel leaders began to resent the prominence and prestige of the Ranee; perhaps they thought it degrading to have to accept the leadership and guidance of a woman. At this point Tope succeeded in persuading Rao Saheb to appoint him the commander of the army.

General Rose left Jhansi on the 25th April to attack Kalpi.

Lakshmibai persuaded the Indian leaders that they should not shut themselves up behind the walls of Kalpi, but should go out to meet the enemy after careful preparation and planning. The town of Koonch, forty-two miles from Kalpi and about ten miles

from the main road leading to Jhansi, was occupied by the rebel army. The Ranee had selected this place as it was difficult to attack owing to the dense forests which surrounded it. Rao Saheb fortified the western approaches and the Jhansi gate.

Anticipating the enemy's tactics, Lakshmibai drew up a plan of action which would not have given Sir Hugh a chance to turn the Peshwa's flank and threaten his rear. Tope had lost the Betwa battle mainly because he neglected his flank and concentrated all his strength on the centre. At Koonch, he and Rao Saheb rejected Lakshmibai's plan. They put their faith in the western defences of the town and awaited the coming of the British forces.

Sir Hugh Rose's careful reconnaissance convinced him that to attack the enemy from the west and the Jhansi gate would be useless; moreover, it would submit his men to a long engagement in the fierce heat of the sun. So he made a long night march to the left flank, and shortly after daybreak reached the rear of the fort and town, thus turning the strong defences of the Jhansi gate. His skirmishers, under cover of the guns, cleared the woods, temples and walled gardens, whilst the British regiment led by Major Stuart made a circuit to the left, taking all the obstacles before them and cutting the enemy's line in two.

The Peshwa's army, seeing their defence thus broken and their right completely turned, retired in masses from Koonch to the extensive plains stretching towards Kalpi. It was estimated that they lost in the retreat some 600 men, besides fifteen guns.

Tatya again abandoned his army before the battle was over and fled to Charkhi, a village about twenty miles distant, to see his parents. The Ranee returned to Kalpi with her Jhansi horsemen. She was bitterly disappointed; her plan of action had been completely ignored, the battle was lost, and the rebels were on

the run once again. It was her first experience of fighting in the company of Tope and other rebel leaders and it was certainly not a very encouraging one. However, she was still ready to fight on indefinitely and was looking forward to the coming conflict at Kalpi. Of all the rebel leaders, she alone was not dispirited by the defeat at Koonch.

Colonel Malleson alleges that the defeat gave rise to quarrels and animosities in the rebel army. The infantry accused the cavalry of having pusillanimously abandoned them; and all three arms brought the same charge against their General, Tatya Tope, who had disappeared at Koonch as rapidly as he had done at the Betwa, leaving the army to its fate.

The Ranee's Afghan soldiers were charged with not having exhibited at Koonch the stern courage for which they were famous. They were accused of having left the field too soon.

These squabbles created confusion in the councils of the rebels, and the immediate British advance caused a panic among the sepoys at Kalpi as well as those retreating towards it. It was said that at one time there were only eleven sepoys in the town and fort to defend the place.

At this moment a near-miracle happened; the Nawab of Banda arrived unexpectedly with a force of 2,000 cavalry, guns, and infantry, which transformed the situation overnight. The Nawab was energetic in his exertions which were backed up by those of the Ranee and produced a sudden change from despair to confidence. The news of the Nawab's arrival spread quickly, and the fugitive soldiers drifted back to Kalpi from their hideouts in the nearby villages and forests.

The Peshwa held a council of war to consider the next move, as the rebel situation was becoming hourly more desperate. The

British guns were already trained on the walls of Kalpi, the last stronghold of the rebels and their only arsenal.

The Ranee voted for a last-ditch fight. She pointed out, however, that the officers of the various regiments and levies must see to it that their men did not start attacking the enemy and exposing their positions to his fire without the express approval of the commander in charge. She expertly analysed the defeat at Koonch and pointed out that the Red Cavalry of Gwalior had acted imprudently in opening a premature fire on the British. They did not realize that Sir Hugh had divided his forces in groups and the rebel guns were firing on only one of the groups, while the others were carrying out their plan unhampered. When they had completed the encircling movement the British had opened their guns on the Red Cavalry from all sides with disastrous results. 'This forced our men to give up their strong positions and led to our rout and defeat. It is becoming late to extricate ourselves from a perilous position but we can still retrieve our honour if we offer a determined resistance and the troops observe discipline. If we can do that, I feel confident of victory', concluded the Ranee.

The chiefs and the men swore by the sacred waters of the Jumna to fight to the death. 'We will win or perish but never will we leave the field.' Rao Saheb decided to direct the operations personally and made the dispositions of the army.

Kalpi is situated on a high rock rising from the Jumna and is surrounded by miles of deep ravines. For its protection Rao Saheb had constructed elaborate defence works on the main road from Koonch. Apparently he expected Sir Hugh to attack Kalpi from the direction of Koonch.

The rebels were also hoping that the sun would hamper the British advance, as it was known that the hot season was taking

heavy toll of the European officers and men. The medical dispatches tell a graphic story of how during the operation before Koonch the men of the 71st Highlanders and the 3rd Europeans dropped down in numbers on the field from sunstroke.

'In fact, the sun was a far more deadly enemy than the rebels, for there was no cover. Stretcher after stretcher was brought into the field hospital, with officers and men suffering from sunstroke, some dead, some prostrate, others laughing or sobbing in delirium. The General himself had fallen three times from sunstroke, but each time forced himself to rally until the victory was won.'[1]

The British had in Sir Hugh Rose a leader who regarded difficulties as a challenge. The advanced state of the hot season meant that the rains were close at hand and Sir Hugh was resolved to finish the campaign before the rainy season began and the Jumna made movement impossible by enormous floods. His scouts brought him reports of the enemy's strong defence works and the wellnigh impregnable ravines which the Rao's army had occupied to protect Kalpi from an attack from the direction of Koonch. Finding it impossible to tackle the rebels against these defences, he decided to break off to the right and to join hands with Brigadier Maxwell's force at Golowlee, six miles east of Kalpi and on the northern bank of the Jumna. By this adroit move he could avoid unnecessary fighting and attack the town in a manner wholly unanticipated by the Peshwa. His plan was that Maxwell should shell the city and fort with his batteries from the northern bank of the river while Rose himself, with his own force and Maxwell's camel corps and infantry, which included some Sikhs, should clear the ravines on the east side of the city and attack the fort on its southern face.

[1] *Clyde and Strathnairn* by Sir O. T. Burne.

Acting upon information that the enemy intended to attack in force on his right on the morning of 22nd May, Sir Hugh strengthened his position there. He placed himself in the centre of his line with the camel corps under Major Ross to meet any emergency, that is to say, to reinforce the right or left as required. Just as he expected, at ten o'clock in the morning, the Rao's men appeared along the entire front of the British lines—a move not to the liking of the Ranee. She had advised the Peshwa not to expose his men to the enemy's fire which, she rightly thought, could not be answered effectively from their position. The result was that the shot, shell and shrapnel from the enemy's heavy guns and howitzers began to tell upon the Rao's men and created confusion in his cavalry. At this moment Rose ordered his horse artillery, field batteries and cavalry to attack them ruthlessly. The Peshwa's men turned and fled, vast numbers of their infantry making for the villages and the ravines towards Kalpi.

The sight of his men retreating in confusion unnerved Rao Saheb and he thought of leaving the field with the Nawab of Banda. But the Ranee urged him to hold on. She mounted her horse and dashed off with the Red Cavalry to attack the enemy's right wing. She fell on them like a tigress. The attack was so unexpected and furious that the British soldiers and their Indian comrades fell back in confusion. Her example heartened the other rebel leaders, who now dashed forward to join the attack. The Peshwa's left batteries opened up and the infantry poured in an overwhelming musketry fire on the British right. The Ranee pressed on and reached the British light field guns and mortar battery which she soon silenced. 'She reached within twenty feet of the guns' and her men sabred the gunners.

Brigadier Stuart dismounted and, sword in hand, placed himself

by the guns and bade the men defend them with their lives. At this critical moment Sir Hugh brought up the camel corps. Dismounting the riflemen and leading them forward himself, he charged the advancing foe who were now within a few yards of the British guns.

The charge of the camel corps dramatically changed the situation; the Peshwa's men could not withstand the onslaught and fell back in confusion to the ravines.

In the meantime Rao Saheb, who was fighting on the left in the hope of sending reinforcements to the Ranee on the right, was completely routed and driven back into Kalpi. The news of his collapse shattered all hopes of victory for the Ranee and her men, and they also retired to Kalpi.

The battle was won, and Sir Hugh prepared to attack Kalpi itself the next morning. But the rebel morale was so broken by their defeat that they had already begun to evacuate the place. In fact Kalpi had been won by the general action on the banks of the Jumna and was next day occupied without further fighting.

What the loss of Kalpi must have meant to the rebels will be understood when we realize what an enormous amount of war material the British found there. Dr Sylvester's account says:

'There was little or no loot found in the town: the fort, and its munitions of war in such vast quantities, was the prize. Almost the whole of the inside was covered by tents, shamiahnas, palls, and routees, under which the greater part of the garrison had lived. Sepoy uniforms and arms were scattered over the floors of all of them. There was an indescribable medley here, just as in the fort of Jhansi, but the articles here all pertained to the art of war. There were guns, large and small, numbering fifteen, besides a large mortar and howitzer: there were conical stacks of English

round shot and shell, and several sheds in which the manufacture of cannon, howitzers, shells and the repair of arms was being carried on. The tools and appliances, such as forges, hammers, vices, smith's braces, etc., were all of English make. Several muskets had been re-stocked, and very well fitted. In the arsenal the uniforms were knee deep, comprising not only sepoy clothes, but coats that had been taken from Windham's slain, belonging to H.M.'s 88th Regiment, some bearing the number 92, with the Prince of Wales's plume; also one or two ladies' bonnets, together with brass-band instruments, parts of cornopeans, French horns, trumpets, and Infantry bugles, Military drums, flags, standards, Glengarries, stocks, caps, pouches, belts, and boxes of musket cartridges. Underground, and discovered subsequently, was a vast store of ammunition, including 60,000 pounds of English gunpowder, shot, shell and fire arms. In fact, this was the great central arsenal of the mutineers, and had it been capable of defence it would not have fallen such an easy prey to us.'

The victorious British General ceremoniously hoisted the Union Jack again on the fort of Kalpi on 24th May 1858—Queen Victoria's thirty-ninth birthday!

The capture of Kalpi completed the plan of campaign which the Government of India had drawn up for the Central India Field Force. Sir Hugh Rose had accomplished his task admirably and Lord Canning, Governor-General, sent him a telegram: 'Your capture of Kalpi has crowned a series of brilliant and uninterrupted successes. I thank you and your brave soldiers with all my heart.'

The Commander-in-Chief, Sir Colin Campbell, had decided to disband the C.I.F. Force after the fall of Kalpi and accordingly the necessary arrangements were taken in hand. Sir Hugh was

anxious to return to Bombay and enjoy some rest. Three days after the action at Koonch he wrote: 'I do not think I shall stay in India to pass such another torment as 110 degrees in the shade. I have succeeded militarily better than I could have expected, and that is all I wanted.'

But before Sir Hugh could start his journey to Bombay, information came which upset all his plans and caused a sensation throughout India hardly less than that of the outbreak of the revolt at Meerut.

CHAPTER 16

The last battle

After the defeat at Kalpi, Lakshmibai went with Rao Saheb to Gopalpur, about forty-six miles from Gwalior, where they were soon joined by Tatya Tope, the Nawab of Banda and others. The rebel situation had become worse than ever. They were aware that the enemy would soon be after them and they had nothing to fight back with. They possessed some sort of army, but it was 'completely down and discouraged', to use Sir Hugh's description; they had lost all their defensive positions, including the formidable fortresses of Jhansi and Kalpi; their worst loss was of course that of their big guns, horse-artillery and the well-stocked magazine of ammunition. Capitulation or a miserable, fugitive existence seemed to be the only choice before them.

Day and night the leaders searched for some way of evading capture by the British. Rao Saheb and the Nawab were anxious to continue the fight, but they did not see how; again it was the the Ranee who pulled them out of the morass of despondency and put them on the road to victory.

'Let us remember,' she said, 'that all through the history of the Mahratta kings they were victorious because of their possession of impregnable fortresses. What was true then is equally true now. Was it not the possession of fortresses like Jhansi and Kalpi that enabled us to fight the British for so long? Unfortunately, we have lost them and we cannot make a fight without a strong fort. It is no use trying to run away; the enemy is sure to pursue and

destroy us. We must capture a strong fortress and under its protection carry on our struggle till victory is won.'

They listened eagerly to hear the name of such a fortress. But before she revealed her choice she looked at them to see if anybody had a suggestion to make. No one had. At last she said, 'I think we should march on Gwalior and obtain the help of the Maharaja and his army. With that fort in our hands we can still carry on the war and win victory'.

The assembly was startled; the suggestion proved once more that the Ranee had an instinctive appreciation of the situation and was capable of advancing a bold solution. The Peshwa warmly congratulated her and made immediate preparations to advance on Sindhia's capital. This was a stroke of imagination which not only impressed the rebel leaders but staggered the enemy too. When the news reached the British that Rao Saheb and the Ranee were on their way to Gwalior they could not believe it. 'The idea was as original and daring as that which prompted the memorable seizure of Arcot' (by Clive), writes T. R. Holmes in his *History of the Indian Mutiny*. Lord Canning telegraphed in alarm to Hamilton: 'If Sindhia joins the Mutiny, I shall have to pack off tomorrow.'

Col. Malleson pays a high tribute to Lakshmibai's grasp of strategy and independence of mind. He says:

'The situation then seemed desperate to the rebel chieftains. But desperate situations suggest desperate remedies; and a remedy which, on first inspection, might well seem desperate, did occur to the fertile brain of one of the confederates. To which one it is not certainly known. But, judging by the leading group of conspirators by their antecedents—Rao Saheb, the Nawab of Banda, Tatya Tope, and the Ranee of Jhansi—we may at once dismiss

the two first from consideration. They possessed neither the character nor the genius to conceive a plan so vast and so daring. Of the two who remain, we may dismiss Tatya Tope. Not that he was incapable of forming the design, but—we have his memoirs—and in those he takes to himself no credit for the most successful act with which his career is associated. The fourth conspirator possessed the genius, the daring, the despair necessary for the conception of great deeds. She was urged on by hatred, by desire of vengeance, by a bloodstained conscience, by a determination to strike hard whilst there was yet a chance. She could recognize the possibilities before her, she could hope even that if the first blow were successful the fortunes of the campaign might be changed; she possessed and exercised unbounded influence over one at least of her companions—the Rao Saheb. The conjecture, then, almost amounts to certainty that the desperate remedy which the confederates decided to execute at Gopalpur was suggested and pressed upon her comrades by the daring Ranee of Jhansi.'

The city of Gwalior lies at the foot of a precipitous, isolated rock, about eighty miles south of Agra. The formidable hill-fortress, which makes Gwalior so important, is built upon a rock one and a half miles in length, by about 300 yards wide, rising to 340 feet above the plain. The sides of the rock are precipitous and rugged and are impossible of ascent except by ladders or by a single approach on the north-eastern side, where it gradually dips toward the plain. Around the brink of the precipice a strong stone parapet is erected within which rises the fort.

The entrance to the enclosure within the rampart is near the north end of the east side; in the lower part by a steep road, and in the upper part by steps cut in the rock, wide enough to permit

elephants to make the ascent. A high and massive wall protects the outer side of this huge staircase: seven gateways are placed at intervals along its ascent; and guns at the summit command the whole of it. Within the enclosure of an inner rampart is the citadel—an antique palace surmounted by kiosks, with six lofty round towers or bastions, connected by walls of immense thickness and extent.

It was calculated that no less than 15,000 men would be needed to garrison this fortress completely and it was always considered of great importance by the Mahratta rulers. No one knows when it was first built, but traditional stories and folk songs say that it has seen battles for over a thousand years.

Gwalior had always been a military post of great importance, as well from its local peculiarity of position, as from its commanding situation in central India. On account of its great strength and strategic importance the Mahrattas made it their principal depot for artillery, ammunition and military stores.

Within the walls of the fort are large natural caverns, descending into the bowels of the hill on which it is built, from which a plentiful supply of excellent water is available.

Tatya Tope undertook to win over the Maharaja's army to the rebel cause and set off the same evening. He knew Gwalior well. In September of the previous year he had successfully induced the Indian regiments in the British Army there to rise against their foreign masters and go with him to Cawnpore, where, with their help, he had inflicted a crushing defeat on Col. Wyndham.

Tope was running some risk in going to Gwalior. The Maharaja and his minister, Dinkar Rao Rajwade, were sworn friends of the British. However, Tope had shrewdly gauged

public feeling and felt secure in the general sympathy felt for the rebel cause. His mission was further helped by the fact that his son-in-law was a resident of the city and the police commissioner was a man from Bithur. They were both working actively for him.

During his brief stay in Gwalior Tatya discovered that Sindhia's army, which consisted mostly of his Mahratta bodyguards, was divided in its loyalty. The officers and men were not actively disloyal to their master but they found it difficult to resist the religious and racial appeal of the rebel cause. Many of them thought the Maharaja was playing false with the Peshwa's house to whom he owed his kingdom. Tatya was thus able to secure solemn promises from the army leaders that they would offer no resistance if the Peshwa advanced on Gwalior. The political situation in Gwalior was, indeed, ripe for a *coup d'état*, as Tatya reported on his return to Gopalpur.

The Peshwa wished to avoid, if he could, any show of force as he was anxious to secure the willing co-operation of the Maharaja. He therefore sent very persuasive and courteous messages, saying that they were coming with no hostile intentions, but only to get supplies and money, and go to the Deccan; that opposition was useless, for the troops and people of Gwalior were against the British and the rebels had received from the city 200 letters of invitation and assurance.

The Maharaja was completely under the influence of his prime minister, Dinkar Rao, who, in turn, was a tool in the hands of Major Charters Macpherson, the political agent. It is astonishing that although Macpherson had fled to Agra for safety he was still operating by remote control and advising Dinkar Rao who was ready to carry out his instructions. In his *Notes on the Revolt*

in the N.W. Provinces of India, Charles Raikes observes: 'Few know how much we, at Agra, are indebted to Major Macpherson for our immunity from attack by the full force of the Gwalior Contingent, with their powerful siege artillery. The real state of the case was this: . . . Major Macpherson, from the interior of the fort at Agra, ruled the course of events at the Court of Gwalior.'

The Maharaja turned a deaf ear to the appeals of the Rao Saheb and prepared to give battle in the belief that his own men would stand by him. Dinkar Rao favoured an exclusively defensive policy, pending the arrival of British reinforcements, which he was expecting at any moment. But the Maharaja was impulsive and also anxious to show his military skill and sense of loyalty to the British, so on 1st June he ordered his troops to attack the Peshwa's army. He led his 8,000 men and twenty-four guns to Burragaon, eight miles from Gwalior. The guns opened fire on the Peshwa's army, contrary to Tope's assurances that Sindhia's army would not fight. Tatya was dismayed by this development and even thought for a while that the firing was really a salute of welcome. The Ranee laughed at this absurd suggestion, rode off with 200 cavalrymen, and attacked the Maharaja's guns. Her appearance on the battlefield did more than all the secret intriguing and diplomacy of Tatya Tope. The news that Lakshmibai was leading the attack was enough to make Sindhia's men leave the guns. Indeed the action had scarcely begun before his army melted like a snowball in the sun. Some left the field, others fraternized with the foe; 'while very many went off to eat water melons in the bed of the Morar'.

Sindhia strove to induce his bodyguard to fight and about sixty of these were killed and wounded. He then ascended an

adjacent hill and saw his whole force marching homewards; whereupon he galloped straight to his palace with about fifteen attendants, changed his dress, remounted, and rode towards Agra. Dinkar Rao, on hearing of this disaster, made arrangements for the escape of the Maharaja's mother, and other ladies. Then he hastened to overtake Sindhia.

Rao Saheb entered the city in triumph and occupied the palace, where he held a grand durbar on 3rd June to proclaim his assumption of power as the head of the Mahratta confederacy. A special canopy was erected to accommodate thousands of guests. It was decorated with Mahratta flags, festoons and green mango branches. At the entrances the guests were greeted under arches of banana plants from which hung bunches of the golden fruit.

All the sardars, noblemen, statesmen, bankers, merchants and the people's representatives were seated according to their rank, position and court precedence. Tatya Tope was given a special seat of honour with his Rohila, Afghan, Pathan and Rajput military commanders who wore their distinctive, colourful uniforms, with swords at their sides. It was an impressive and spectacular scene, reminiscent of the heyday of the Mahratta glory. Rao Saheb put on the traditional royal robes of his family and decorated himself with the *sheerpech* and *kalagitura* (special ornaments worn on the forehead to signify the sovereign authority of the wearer) and pearl earrings. Round his neck he wore ropes of large pearls and strings of dazzling diamonds. The attendants, in red and gold robes, hailed his entry with loyal greetings and the whole assembly stood to pay homage and allegiance to their new ruler. A fanfare sounded as the Peshwa ascended the throne to the chanting of Vedic prayers of learned

Brahmins. A salute of 101 guns boomed to herald the new régime from the fort.

The assembled sardars and people warmly congratulated Rao Saheb for re-establishing the Hindu Raj and reviving the glory of the Mahratta name and as a mark of their allegiance and fidelity the military leaders offered their swords on a silver tray to Rao Saheb, who touched them and returned them to signify his acceptance of their homage. He thanked them sincerely for their support and conferred robes of honour and titles on the sardars and military leaders who had served him loyally all along. Once again the spirit of liberty was born and the atmosphere became charged with enthusiasm and jubilation. Everyone present felt as though the hated foreigner had already been driven out of India and the country was free.

To celebrate the auspicious occasion thousands of Brahmins, as tradition demanded, were feasted for two weeks. In return they blessed the new régime and offered prayers for the Peshwa's victory and prosperity.

All this was impressive and was perhaps very necessary for propaganda purposes. The Peshwa was creating a new rallying point for the rebels all over the country; he and Tatya Tope expected the Mahratta Princes in the Deccan to rise in a body, as there undoubtedly was great sympathy and love for the Peshwa family. But to assume the instruments of power and to wield them effectively are two different matters. On this point Rao Saheb and the Ranee could not see eye to eye. She maintained that his semi-coronation ceremony could not have the desired effect of impressing the people and reviving the past glory of the Mahrattas without gaining a resounding victory over the enemy. She did not adopt active measures to oppose the Peshwa in his

foolish behaviour, but refused to take any part in the ceremonies and thus showed her disapproval and displeasure.

She is reported to have remarked that when it was necessary to make cannon balls Rao Saheb was taking special delight in preparing sweet sugar balls for his Brahmins.

Lakshmibai patiently waited for a couple of days for the junketing to subside. Then, finding no change in the conduct of the Peshwa, she decided to tell him bluntly how stupid and unrealistic his behaviour was.

'The victory over Sindhia,' she said, 'has gone to your head and made you feel as though you are the master of the land. You will find this attitude most harmful. You must not underrate the strength and resources of the enemy—the English are shrewd and skilful. Nor must you be under the illusion that you are free from danger because of your possession of the strong fort of Gwalior and because Sindhia's army is with you. You can never tell how and from where the enemy will attack you.

'By God's grace you have obtained control of Sindhia's army and his fabulous treasury. This is a golden opportunity for you to prepare for the coming struggle by putting in order the defences of the city, making the soldiers happy and contented by paying them liberally, and also putting them under capable commanders who will maintain discipline and keep their men fighting fit.'

With the capture of Gwalior, fortune had placed in the Rao's hands a splendid army, war material and money. The garrison of the fort opened its gates to him and with it there fell into his hands fifty to sixty guns (comprising horse, field and siege artillery) and an arsenal with abundance of military stores. The rebels who had fled, a disorderly and helpless mob, from Kalpi

now found themselves provided with all the necessary funds and material of war and with a well-equipped army as their allies. The Ranee was anxious to make full use of this favourable turn in the fortune of the rebels to consolidate their strength. But the Peshwa ignored her warning and continued to fritter away time, energy and money in empty pomp and ceremony. The result was that when Sir Hugh Rose marched on Gwalior, the Peshwa was found completely unprepared to face the new attack.

Rose cancelled the leave which had just been granted to him and telegraphed to Lord Canning his willingness to resume command of the army and go after the rebels at Gwalior. The Governor-General was only too glad to accept his offer and accordingly Rose left Kalpi on 6th June and arrived at Morar, close to Gwalior, on the 16th. Here he at once attacked the rebel forces there and cleared the Agra-Gwalior road. His plan was to repeat the tactics he had so successfully used at Jhansi and Kalpi—to invest Gwalior as closely as its great extent would allow and then to attack on the weakest side. He reckoned that the defeat of the enemy outside and inside the city would be followed, as at Kalpi, by the easy capture of the fortress.

A close reconnaissance revealed to him the weakest side of Gwalior as being in the east where the city was commanded by high hills which were out of range of the guns in the fort.

It is surprising that the Peshwa and Tope were so uninformed about the enemy's movements that they realized nothing until he actually knocked on their door. As usual they roused themselves to activity at the eleventh hour and made hasty dispositions of their guns and men; apparently they had not expected Sir Hugh to follow them so quickly.

As a last resort Tatya called on Lakshmibai for advice. He found

her fuming with rage at the ineptitude of her leader. Angrily she said to him.

'Rao Saheb has destroyed all hopes of victory by deliberately ignoring the warnings I gave him and by neglecting his war preparations and giving all his attention to trivialities. The enemy is upon us and our army is not ready; everywhere I see nothing but disorder and chaos. How can you expect to win the battle? However, I shall not lose heart. The only thing you can do now is to take out your troops for one glorious attack on the English without caring for the result. You must see to it that the attack is sudden and determined and overwhelming; the enemy must be rolled back.

'I am ready to do my duty. You do yours! Go ahead and God be with you!'

At the end of the consultation Tope entrusted to her the defence of the east side of Gwalior and hurried back to Rao Saheb to make other preparations.

Lakshmibai lost not a moment in gathering her men and taking up her position. She put on her armour and her powerful sword which was studded with diamonds and rubies. The cavalry and infantry under her command fell into battle order and marched out to attack the enemy. The battle plans, wrote *The Times* correspondent (3rd August, 1848), 'were effected mainly under the direction and personal supervision of the Ranee, who, clad in military attire and attended by a picked and well-armed escort, was constantly in the saddle, ubiquitous and untiring'.

Sir Hugh Rose and General Napier had occupied the Morar Cantonment, containing the enemy from that side. Brigadier Smith and Major Orr joined forces four miles south-east of the city. Their orders were to stop the enemy escaping in that

direction. On 16th June, while Smith was preparing to encamp, the Ranee ordered her guns to open fire on his troops and simultaneously attacked him, charging suddenly from behind the hills, Her attack was so unexpected and formidable that Smith and his men had to withdraw, losing heavily.

That day, Smith dared not attempt again to advance but on the following morning he skilfully lured the rebel troops from their sheltered position into the more open plain. The Ranee advanced with her men and gave battle, covered by heavy artillery fire. Inspired by her presence, her troops attacked the enemy with determination and skill and forced them back again, but they were reinforced by a squadron of the 8th Hussars under Captain Heneage. Still the rebels held their ground, killing the enemy as fast as they could. The Ranee was in the thick of the fight, using her sword with both hands[1] and holding the reins of her horse in her mouth. Suddenly she fell from a carbine shot, mortally wounded. The British were unaware of the Ranee's fall, her identity being effectively concealed by her male attire—she was wearing cavalry uniform—and her cropped hair. One of her faithful servants picked her up quickly and carried her to the rear. Her 200 men, true to their vow, fought to the last man, but when they had fallen the Hussars broke through to the rebel camp.

[1] Shri Vrindalal Varma of Jhansi says that the Ranee was riding a horse while she used two long swords with her two hands. He cites Turab Ali as his authority for this feat, who was in the police service of the East India Company and was stationed at Jhansi. Ali died in 1943 at the age of 115, and told Mr Varma before his death that he used to see Lakshmibai 'practising the art of managing the horse with the reins in her teeth and wielding two swords by her two hands. She practised this regularly twice a week in the gardens attached to her royal palace—now known as Hardy Gunj'.

It was two days before the British knew that they had deprived the Peshwa's army of its one effective leader for Sir Robert Hamilton wrote in his report: 'The fact that the Ranee had been killed was not known in Brigadier Smith's camp until he heard it by a note from me.'

Sir Robert's report confirmed the Ranee's death but gave a version of its surrounding circumstances very different from the version of Major Charters Macpherson, Political Agent at Gwalior, who says, 'Near the Phool Bag batteries, I may observe, fell the Ranee of Jhansi. She was seated, says her servant, drinking sherbat, 400 of the 5th Irregulars near her, when the alarm was given that the Hussars approached. Forty or fifty of them came up and the rebels fled save about fifteen. Ranee's horse refused to leap the canal when she received a shot in the side and then a sabre cut on the head but rode off. She soon after fell dead, and was burnt in a garden close by.'

Hamilton who claims to have made on-the-spot enquiry writes: 'The fact that the Ranee had been killed was not known in Brigadier Smith's camp until he heard of it by a note from me. It occurred from all I could ascertain whilst the Ranee with a group in which were the Rao Sahib and Tantia were looking at the advance on the heights early in the day. The Ranee was on horseback, and close to her was the female (a Mahomaden long in the family) who seems never to have left her side on any occasion, these two were struck by bullets and fell, the Ranee survived about twenty minutes, she was carried towards Pool Baugh, the Rao Sahib attending her, this event quite upset the Chiefs, and caused the greatest consternation. Arrangements were instantly made for burning the body which was conveyed in a Palkee to the bank of the river between Pool Baugh and the Fort,

and from hence it not being practicable to get the Palankeen over the enclosure of a garden near a temple the body was lifted out and carried by the attendants over the enclosure to a spot under some fine large trees where it was burnt. Hardly had the ceremony been performed when the charge of the 8th Hussars came almost up to the garden and Temple. . . . It was evident that the ceremony had been interrupted, for when I went to the spot Dr Christinson picked up fragments of bones which proved that the usual custom of sifting the ashes had not been performed.'

Since Macpherson and Hamilton wrote their reports much more authentic and reliable data on the circumstances surrounding the death of the Ranee has been found in the old records of Bhopal, Gwalior and Indore. Now it can be stated with authority that the reports of Macpherson and Hamilton were very much wide of the mark, probably because they were based on hearsay and conjecture. It is not also improbable that the Indian informants of the British were deliberately trying to mislead and confuse the latter in the hope that the Ranee should get enough time to escape if she were still alive. It is difficult to explain otherwise the serious discrepancy in the two versions. Macpherson and Hamilton both mention the Hussars but in different context. Macpherson says that the Ranee 'received a shot in the side and then a sabre cut on the head' in the attack of the Hussars, which killed her. On the other hand Hamilton says that the Hussars came on the scene only after the Ranee was cremated by her friends and followers.

The fact that Dr Christinson (who accompanied Hamilton to the spot) picked up fragments of bones has been cited as proof of the ceremony of sifting ashes being interrupted by the approach of the Hussars. Evidently, Hamilton did not know that this ceremony is not performed immediately after the cremation but the

ashes are left undisturbed for three days after the burning of the body and then the ashes are sifted and bones collected for the purpose of consigning them to the holy Ganges.

Hamilton's account of Ranee Lakshmibai's death is completely unreliable as it is at variance with all other accounts and also at variance with the actual disposition of the Peshwa's forces. Once Tatya Tope assigned the defence of Phool Baug sector to the Ranee on 16th June, there is no record of her meeting Tope or Rao Sahib. This does not mean that there was no communication between her and them. It only means that Tope and the Ranee were either fighting or preparing to fight the enemy on their allotted fronts. There was neither occasion nor time for them to meet together and observe the advance of General Rose's armies as is suggested in Hamilton's account. As the Ranee was never in company with the other two leaders, the story of her being killed by a bullet while watching the British advance and the consequent description of her funeral procession in a 'Palkee' must be dismissed as pure imagination on the part of Hamilton and his informants.

Hamilton's information that Lakshmibai was killed 'early in the day' is also wrong. It was almost dusk when the Hussars' attack came in which she was fatally wounded. Nor is there a river between the Gwalior Fort and Phool Baug—what Hamilton calls a river is a mean little nalla.

Macpherson's account is nearer the truth in that he states the Ranee's death was caused by a shot from the Hussars. But he gives the unfortunate impression that she was killed while trying to run away from the field. 'Her horse refused to leap the canal when she received a shot in the side and a sabre cut on the head but rode off.' The facts are quite different. The conversation

between Tatya Tope and Ranee Lakshmibai which took place on the eve of the battle is significant and important. She had no illusion about the outcome of the battle of Gwalior. She was fully conscious of the weakness in the leadership and composition of the Peshwa's forces but she had made up her mind to fight to the last. Her one slogan was a well-known verse in the Bhagwadgeeta, 'If killed in battle we enter the heaven and if victorious we rule the earth.' Her last injunction to Tatya Tope was never to quit the field whatever happened. She herself had publicly vowed to embrace death rather than save her life by leaving the field; and indeed, she fulfilled her vow by perishing in the Phool Baug engagement.

Envoys of loyal Indian princes have left ample material in their despatches which they sent to their masters, describing the manner in which the Ranee met her death and how she was cremated. None of them mentions Tope or Rao Sahib being near her or present at the cremation.

Bhawani Prasad was representative of the Begum of Bhopal and attached to the Camp of Sir Robert Hamilton, Political Agent to the Governor-General, in Central India. In his despatch, dated 18th June 1858, Prasad writes: 'Yesterday, the Ranee of Jhansi and the Nawab of Banda both present at the entrenchment were personally directing the bombardment against Major R's (Sir Hugh Rose) position. During the engagement that ensued one shell from Major R's battery flew off an arm of the Nawab of Banda and another one went off bruising the Ranee's breast which resulted in her death.'

Maharaja of Indore had two representatives in Sir Robert's camp who also sent their despatches to their master which shed some fresh light on the Ranee's death. Ramchandra Vinayak,

Deputy Vakeel or Envoy writes: 'Jhansiwali Bai was killed in battle on 17th June. It happened like this: at the time of the engagement the lady was present on the battlefield where she received a sabre blow which killed her. All people call her the bravest fighter.'

The other envoy, named Hari Tryambak, writes to say that the battle of Gwalior lasted for four days and 'The Ranee of Jhansi was killed on the second day of the action. At the time of her death she used her sword to the utmost (she fought with her sword valiantly) and later she was cremated.'

All the three Indian authorities agree on the essential points that the Ranee met a soldier's death in the battlefield and that she was killed while actually fighting a hand-to-hand fight or personally directing fire against the British.

The Indian reports cited above were written independently within a week of the Ranee's death and none of them suggests that she was killed anywhere else except on the battlefield. Their unanimous testimony is also supported by John Henry Sylvester who was present in the battle of Gwalior and who wrote his own account of the Malwa Campaign. He gives a detailed description of the Hussars' attack which he likens to the Balaklava Charge and says that it was a memorable affair for the reason that in this action 'the gallant Queen of Jhansi fell from a carbine wound, and was carried to the rear, where she expired, and was burnt according to the custom of Hindoos.'

The peoples of Jhansi and Gwalior cherish the Ranee's death with special pride as she was perhaps the only leader of the Revolt who refused to run away and preferred to die fighting. In ballads and songs they have immortalized the last hours of this brave woman. According to them she ordered her men to hold fast to

their ground and fight back the Hussars, come what may. She herself hurled her horse in the thick of the fight and went all out killing the enemy. When she received the fatal shot her faithful servants picked her up and removed her to the nearby Hindu monastery of Baba Gangadas, a well-known saint of Gwalior.

Exhausted by continuous fighting from morning till dusk and now bleeding heavily from the mortal wounds Ranee Lakshmibai lost consciousness while her few remaining followers watched her helplessly. The Baba apprehended that the end was near and went to her side to console her. Gently he poured some holy Ganges water in her parched mouth and she opened her eyes for a moment and murmured the name of Damodar, her adopted son. Lovingly she felt him all over and turning to her trusted sardar, Ramachandra Deshmukh, whispered, 'I leave my Damodar in your charge.' These were her last words. She closed her eyes and entered eternity.

There was no time to lose as it was feared that the British might return in the morning. The Baba and Deshmukh, therefore, made the necessary arrangements for the funeral and placed the body in a haystack and set fire to it. The spot where her body was burnt was later discovered.

Sir O. T. Burne has described her last characteristic action. 'This Indian Joan of Arc was dressed in a red jacket and trousers and white turban. She wore Sindhia's celebrated pearl necklace which she had taken from his treasury. As she lay mortally wounded in her tent, she ordered these ornaments to be distributed among her troops. The whole rebel army mourned her loss.'

The last sentence was an understatement. As soon as it was known that the Ranee was no longer there to inspire the rebels,

panic spread among their ranks. The main British force hardly needed to attack; the Peshwa's army melted away. Rao Sahib and Tatya Tope made their escape, and Rose regrouped his forces for the final attack on the Fort. It was virtually undefended, and two days later the British General entered it in state with the Maharaja. Even then, all was not quite over.

Some of the rebels were determined to make their last desperate defiance. 'Thirteen men, four of them contingent sepoys and nine Vilayuttees[1] with two women and a child, after proceeding some miles from the vacated Fort towards Agra, resolved deliberately to return and die in it. They fired from the guns on the ramparts four or five shots at the troops drawn out to receive Scindia, and, as he and the agent advanced with their cortège one shot struck immediately in front of them. . . . Lieutenant Rose with a company of the 25th Bombay N.I. went with the aid of the City Kotwall and twenty Pathan Police to destroy these desperate men. They had flung over the walls, into the city, all their gold and silver coin, and other property, and taken post upon a bastion, a gun which commanded the line of approach. That gun burst at the third discharge. Rose advanced. The fanatics slew their women and the child. Rose's party then killed seven of them; but one shot him mortally before the rest could be killed.'[2]

[1] Afghan soldiers.

[2] '1857', Surendra Nath Sen.

CHAPTER 17

'Bravest and best'

With the recapture of Gwalior and the dispersal of the Peshwa's army, there were no more rebel forces in the field. The Indian Mutiny was officially at an end. In various parts of India small rebel bands, relying for food and protection on the village people, held out until they were hunted down; it was only in April 1859 that the whole country was regarded as pacified. But the real struggle lasted no longer than its heroine.

Lakshmibai's body was brought to the spot where she had received her fatal wound, and there burned with great ceremony. She was indeed luckier than her confederates. One of Rose's officers wrote later, after describing her death: 'It is as well that it was so, and that she did not survive to share the ignominious fate of Tatya Tope.'

Tatya refused to accept defeat. Taking to guerrilla warfare with a few followers, he went on harassing the British and the loyal chiefs of Central India, and in this kind of fighting he showed more courage and daring than he ever had in command of an army. Napier, Roberts, and other distinguished commanders tried to capture him, but without success. He evoked great admiration from the veteran war correspondent, William Howard Russell of *The Times* who wrote on 17th January, 1859: 'Our very remarkable friend, Tantia Tope is too troublesome and clever an enemy to be admired. Since last June he has kept Central India in a fervour. He has sacked stations, plundered treasuries, emptied arsenals, collected armies, lost them; fought battles, lost them;

taken guns from native princes, lost them; taken more, lost them: then his motions have been like forked lightning; for weeks he has marched thirty and forty miles a day. He has crossed the Nurbudda to and fro; he has marched between our columns, behind them and before them. Ariel was not more subtly aided by the best stage mechanism. Up mountains, over rivers, through ravines and valleys, amid swamps, on he goes, backwards and forwards, and sideways and zigzag ways—now falling upon a post-cart, and carrying off the Bombay mails—now looting a village, headed and burned, yet evasive as Proteus.'

Colonel Malleson reckons that the British had to march up and down Central India over 750 miles before Tatya was captured. Indeed, he was caught only when a trusted friend, Raja Man Singh, betrayed him to Major R. Meade. Tatya made a statement on 10th April 1859, in which he frankly stated that he owed his loyalty and allegiance to Nana Saheb Peshwa only. He also absolved his master from any responsibility for the massacre of Europeans at Cawnpore. He was hanged at Sipri on 18th April, 1859. He faced death with complete indifference and calm and his last words were: 'Whatever I did was done according to the orders of my master, Nana Saheb Peshwa. And I have done nothing wrong. Please finish the job quickly. I want to join eternity without delay.'[1]

Rao Saheb gave up the fight and put on the ochre robe of a *sanyasin*—one who has renounced the world. He retired to the

[1] In the Royal United Service Museum, London, is preserved Tatya's uniform. It is an 'achkan' of dark woollen material and embroidered in gold and silver. The inscription says: 'Coat of the Indian rebel leader, Tantia Topi, who was hanged on the 18th April 1859'. There is also a pencil sketch of Tope with a letter from an ex-Indian Army officer.

forests of the Punjab, where he lived a secluded life for four years; the British spies, however, discovered his whereabouts and caught caught him at Chenani in Jammu territory.

Rao Saheb made a statement in which he denied stoutly that he had any hand in the massacre of the English at Cawnpur. This was abundantly vindicated even before his arrest by the exhaustive enquiry made about the massacre by Col. Williams who examined sixty-one witnesses; and it is most significant that not one of them accused Rao Saheb of abetting, inciting or committing murder. 'But Bibighar had to be avenged', as Dr Sen says, 'and Rao Saheb had to atone for the sins of others.' For this purpose a fresh enquiry was ordered and a fresh lot of witnesses invited who obliged the British authorities by testifying to Rao Saheb's crime. This new evidence was considered as most truthful and convincing; Rao Saheb was found guilty and was hanged at Bithur, in front of his own palace, on 20th August 1862.

This is not the only case in which imperial retribution, which took the form of mass reprisals in the months that followed the Mutiny, continued for years after. Damodar Rao, the adopted son of the last Raja of Jhansi, was barely ten years old in 1857. In no sense could he be held responsible for anything done by the Ranee. But he was never allowed to enjoy the 600,000 rupees which the Government of India held in trust for him and was pledged to put at his disposal when he came of age. It must be remembered that when Lakshmibai wanted some of the money for ceremonial purposes, she was told that it was the boy's property, and allowed an advance only as a loan and when she found guarantors who were officially examined. However, when Damodar asked for his money, a series of representations produced the curt reply: 'The petitioner may be informed that

the Government of India decline to interfere in the matter.'

In 1882 the Secretary of State wrote: 'The confiscation of the private possessions of the Jhansi Raj, consequent of the rebellion of the Ranee during the mutiny of 1857, has long since been carried into effect, and I see no reason to reopen the question. The memorialist, who appears to have been treated with reasonable liberality, may therefore be informed that I decline to interfere in his behalf.' The liberality in question was a monthly allowance of 150 rupees, later raised to 200!

In 1936—when the Empire had only eleven years to run—the question of Damodar's pension was raised in the Legislative Assembly by Dr M. S. Aney. He was told that the Government considered the issue closed.

Lakshmibai's place in history is secure. There was no Austerlitz or Waterloo to her credit; nor could she do much in administrative achievements; she did not rule a great state such as Hyderabad or Gwalior. And yet among all her contemporary rulers and colleagues-in-arms she stands shoulder high; she is the shining star of India.

However, like all great personalities in the past, Lakshmibai has had her critics debating her place in Indian history. This controversy has surrounded her career from the day she entered the public arena. It is indeed a sure sign of her greatness that the lapse of time has not blunted the edge of the debate which began in 1853 when she first threw off the purdah and came out in public. Many have suggested that she joined the Revolt for personal reasons and that if Lord Dalhousie had treated her more gently and justly she would probably have fought on the side of the British. In support of their contention they point to the many memorials she presented to the British authorities before and in

the midst of the Revolt. Perhaps the Ranee's cavilling critics forget that history abounds with instances of great careers the beginning of which could be traced in personal grievances and wrongs. Pym and Hampden for example, were opposed to the taxation by Charles I's government of their profits from a company called 'The Providence Island Adventurers', of which they were directors. And yet these two Englishmen are regarded as the great colleagues of Cromwell and founders of true democratic traditions in Britain.

It has also been said that the war of 1857 was an unorganized, sporadic, and desultory affair with no co-ordination and effective liaison between the various centres of disaffection and personalities involved and for this reason it is a misnomer to call it a national uprising.

But these critics forget the fundamental aspect of all such rebellions. Popular revolts in any country or age are never brought about by ready-made plans and blue prints. They deal with basic passions and prejudices and give birth to great epics. People in revolt are stirred by some great injustice and move forward in mass anger and energy. Once roused, no power can stop them until the revolt either achieves its end, or spends its force and disintegrates.

No modern British writer would repeat the calumnies directed against the Ranee when a concerted effort was being made to kill the loyalties that seemed subversive to the Raj. Few would deny that her treatment at Dalhousie's hands amply excused her resolve to fight for what she considered to be her rights and those of her people. As we have seen, even some contemporary writers were imaginative enough to take this view. Malleson, for example, wrote: 'Whatever her faults in British eyes may have been, her

countrymen will ever remember that she was driven by ill-treatment into rebellion, and that she lived and died for her country.'

Her courage on the battlefield could not fail of acknowledgment. When General Rose was told of her death, he exclaimed that 'the Ranee of Jhansi was the bravest and best military leader of the rebels'.

Indians, however, revere her memory because of other qualities than simple courage. In her lifetime it was said of her: 'She is an avatar of the goddess Kali, come to the mortal world to save the down-trodden Indian from the wicked British. Whatever her action, it is for the commonweal of the people; she is good and brave, just and generous, and above all pure in mind and body—indeed, the holy crusader and the anointed saint.'

The last word recalls the comparison with Joan of Arc which, as we noted, occurred naturally to European observers. Both were women of great ability and magnetic personal force; both had an iron nerve; both refused to admit defeat even in the face of death. But Joan's chief inspiration was her celestial voices. The Ranee, though deeply religious, never claimed to be guided by any supernatural power. To understand the phenomenon called Joan of Arc, one must delve into the psychological interpretation of spiritual experience. To know why the Ranee fought the British, one has only to study the way in which India was ruled by the Company; it provided motive enough and to spare for a woman of Lakshmibai's pride and spirit.

A far truer comparison would be to describe the Ranee as the Indian Boadicea. Both women fought against imperial tyranny to assert their rights; both were unjustly and harshly treated, and this made them bitter enemies of the occupying power and

incited them to rebellion. Finally the Ranee was, like Boadicea, a widow without a male heir to her kingdom; and when Lord Dalhousie annexed Jhansi he was unconsciously copying the Roman Satrap, Suetonius Paulinus, who 1800 years before had deprived the Icenian queen of her hereditary rights 'as if the Romans had been given the whole country'.

The parallel becomes almost complete when we see both the imperial powers triumph over their adversaries for the same reason. Each of the queens commanded an enormous number of followers, but both proved helpless before the disciplined and highly trained formations that opposed them. It is also interesting to note that although Suetonius triumphed over Boadicea, the Romans suffered a severe shock in the revolt of the Iceni and as a result they adopted a more liberal policy; in the same way the British in India, after their victory, abandoned their policy of annexation and allowed the Indian princes the right to choose their successors when a male heir was not available.

Lakshmibai is remembered, above all, because she personified her country's urges and aspirations, hopes and fears, passions and hatreds. She was neither the originator of the Mutiny nor, until its last phase, among its leaders. Yet it was she who made the idea of it into a living reality, and turned the half-military, half-feudal revolt, so far as was historically possible, into India's war of independence. She was a daughter of her age and class, and her conscious objective was limited to regaining sovereignty over her State. She acquired, nevertheless, a sense of mission and of what we now call patriotism. 'To fight against the English,' she declared at the moment of crisis, 'has now become my *dharma*'—a word that, for its religious overtones, is immensely stronger than the dictionary equivalent of 'duty'.

More than any other leader of the rebellion, Lakshmibai had some vision of the free India of the future. Certainly her indomitable spirit has inspired many thousands of others to assert India's will to freedom. 'A great worker and creator,' says the Indian philosopher Arabindo Ghose, 'is not to be judged only by the work he himself did, but also by the greater work he made possible.' By this standard, the Ranee of Jhansi must be accorded a high place among the great of history.

The Ranee's seal